A TALE OF MILLIONS

Major M. RAFIQUL ISLAM, B.U. (Retd.)

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IN MEMORY OF THE MARTYRS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

It is my duty to record my deep sense of gratitude to all those freedom fighters and men under my command who laid down their lives for the liberation of their motherland. I must also mention those compatriots and friends who have not figured in my narration of events in the book but rendered invaluable services in my sector.

The medicos, both military and civilian, did an excellent job. Their task was difficult. They had very little supplies of medicine and fewer staff. But they kept pace with the tempo of the war. Squadron Leader Shamsul Hoq, Major Khurshid, Doctors Barua, Reza, Gofran, Mostafiz and the staff under them earned great admiration of everyone.

The airmen left a deep impression on my mind; they proved that they were equally capable on land. Two fliers, Flight Lieutenant Sultan and Flying Officer Sakhawat, symbolised that force of which we all are so proud.

Captain Enam, Captain Matiur, Lieutenants Showkat, Raqib, Monsoor and Hamid—a cadet who escaped from the Pakistan Military Academy—all of them commanded troops in my sector. They shared great responsibilities with determination and boldly led the troops into action.

Mr Murree, a football star, and Mr Ishaque, an engineer, fought very bravely in a number of encounters. Later, they handled the job of Quartermaster efficiently.

In my sector, I was particularly lucky in securing the enthusiastic cooperation of the politicians as well as the student and labour leaders. Mr Hannan, my civil affairs

adviser, Mr Mosharraf Hussain, Mirza Monsoor, Prof. Nurul Islam, Dr Mannan, Dr Foyeez, Barrister Afsar Uddin – all of them rendered valuable services. The attribute "one of the best sectors" is in fact a reflection on their meritorious services.

Mr H. T. Imam, the then Deputy Commissioner of Rangamati, was one of the few civil servants who joined the liberation war from the start. We worked closely in the most difficult days of the war.

I am also grateful to Dr M. A. Sattar (now Secretary to the Prime Minister) for his timely warning sent to me in February, 1971. But for this I would perhaps have remained in doubt about the intentions of the Pakistan Army on the eve of the crackdown.

This book would not have come out without the inspiration I received from friends and colleagues, relatives, freedom fighters and many others craving to know the truth. I am indebted to Mr Nurul Islam, Editor of the People's View, for publishing my writings in his paper despite threats from interested circles. My uumble gratitude is due to Professor Haroon-ur-Rashid of Chittagong University, Mrs Ellen Sattar, Mr Mohiuddin, Mr Enamul Haq and especially to Mrs Hameeda Hussain of the Oxford University Press. They looked through the manuscript and gave me valuable suggestions. My wife bore the brunt of typing the manuscript. I am grateful to her.

NOVEMBER, 1974
Chittagong

Major M. RAFIQUL ISLAM, B.U. (Retd.)

"Pak Army suddenly attacked E.P.R. base at Peelkhana and the Police Line at Rajarbagh. Street battle going on everywhere. Our freedom fighters are gallantly fighting the enemy for freedom. I appeal to the world to help us in this struggle. May Allah bless you all. Joi Bangla."

· Message of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman sent on the night of March 25, 1971 to Late Alhaj Zahūr Ahmed Choudhury at Chittagong.

"The talks have failed and the Pakistan Army has started killing our people. Fight the Pakistan Army and keep Chittagong free. Inform the Awami League workers and ask other Bengali soldiers to join in the fighting."

Message of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman sent at 10-30 pm on March 25, 1971 to EPR HQ, Chittagong, where, as was known to him, the Bengali EPR troops were prepared for an armed struggle.

CONTENTS

PREFACE

It is a great privilege to be able to fight for one's motherland. God was merciful to grant that opportunity to some of us.

On March 25, 1971 the Pakistan Army swooped down upon the Bengalis. It was correctly guessed by many who were the likely targets of the army. These men joined the war only to escape a direct attack. The war was in fact thrust on them. They had not joined voluntarily. Their participation was merely in crossing over to a safe sanctuary in India.

One of the consequences of the Bangladesh liberation war has been to stimulate a flood of books on the viability of the new state. The publication of this book is timed to coincide with the completion of the three years which we sought for tidying up the mess the country was in following its liberation. Yet today the state of affairs in the country is a telling commentary on how the men I refer to above have managed to deny the fruits of freedom to the Bengalis. I am no politician; I only recount our personal experience of fighting the war, which should act as a reminder to those who may think that we have crossed the crucial years of post-independence.

The war produced two distinct groups: those who went to India and the vast majority that stayed back in Bangladesh. Throughout the nine traumatic months of genocide the people inside Bangladesh put up a grim and bitter struggle but for which Bangladesh would not have achieved its freedom.

Most unlucky were those Bengalis who were stranded in an unfriendly and hostile Pakistan. It was almost impossible for them to escape and join the war. Silently

they went through the seemingly unending days of humiliation and agony. The sacrifice of none is small. It is unfortunate that mistrust amongst the groups and jealousy at national level keep this nation divided.

The attempt in this book is to let truth speak for itself and hence I have chosen to narrate the events as they unfolded on the vast theatre of war that was Bangladesh. Many widely circulated accounts will stand discredited. Some people surviving on falsehood will feel uncomfortable. But truth should not be held back from the people. Truth cannot be sacrificed for individual or group interests.

I talked to military personnel and civilians who fought in different sectors. I have tried to incorporate all the important events in every sector so that a reader can get a clear picture of our grim struggle.

The pattern of the war was almost indentical in every sector. There were only minor variations due to local conditions. Thus the details written about the pattern of fighting or of problems in one sector would suffice for similar facts in other sectors. I have indicated, as far as possible, the sources of my information in the text.

Because of my deep personal involvement in the war the book could not be written in the rigid form of historical narrative. Consequently, it has the inescapable touch of a biography or a memoir.

NOVEMBER, 1974
Chittagong

MAJOR M. RAFIQUL ISLAM, B.U. (Retd.)

PROLOGUE

This is a tale of triumph and tragedy imprinted on the memory of millions of people. The land they live in is a vast expanse of lush-green fields criss-crossed by innumerable rivers, creeks and canals. The soil is unbelievably rich and life is even richer with simplicity.

But the people were not happy in that south Asian country. For nearly two hundred years they had groaned under the British colonial rule. With the partition of India in 1947, West Pakistan, over a thousand miles away from the eastern part, proved an unscrupulous bedfellow. Exploited and oppressed, this stretch of tropical green seethed and swelled, swelled and seethed. A quiet revolution simmered for over two decades until an irresistible human volcano was ready to burst. And when it did the Pakistan Army swooped down upon a whole population to cut it to a size of its own choice. This was indeed very ambitious, perhaps too ambitious to arrest the forces of history.

If wars measure the extent of failure of man as a thinking animal here is one such war. But with a difference. History will rarely bear testimony to such an episode of betrayal, hatred and cruelty. One of the biggest man-made tragedies of history shattered the lives of millions of people.

But that was not just a bit of tumultuous contemporary history. The struggle symbolised the antithesis of good

and evil and was in a sense the fight of the heroic human spirit against the prehistoric monsters.

There were meticulous preparations for that war by the rulers of a nation to whom human lives had no value except for the rise and fall of statistical curves. The preparations were for committing crimes of the most abhorred nature. The result was the destruction of a polity, Pakistan, due to the follies of its own rulers and, simultaneously, the painful birth of a new nation called Bangladesh through a bitter and bloody struggle. None can ever tell how many hundreds of thousands had to sacrifice their lives at the altar of civilisation through that struggle.

Beyond that and even beyond the limitless horizon of human sufferings are the tales of courage, dedication, unity, devotion and a death-defying vow for emancipation from the bondage of slavery. Those will be told and retold for ages and the future generations alone will be able to derive conclusions as to why so much blood had to be shed for so sweet a word, 'Freedom'. This is their legacy.

No less poignant in the whole tragedy is the big powers' seeming apathy towards human sufferings. The sad hours of trial revealed that freedom was the privilege of a few nations, justice a cry of weakness, and morality a practice of medieval antiquity.

Contemporary events are amorphous and are not easily reducible to a correct historic pattern. Distortion of history is easy when archives and documents are not

available. Nor mutilation of truth either to belittle the role of someone or to exaggerate the part played by others is any novelty in human annals. The history of this new-born nation may not be any exception. Truth by now has been mutilated and disfigured. Details have been bypassed and vision obscured for the moment. But truth, in the long run, shall prevail.

Today, to embark on a controversial voyage in history is too vast and ambitious a project. But despite all the odds, someone, someday, may be able to take up that challenge and fulfil the mission that beckons us.

II FLASHBACK

The sun went down into the Bay far beyond the horizon. Darkness fell and the silence of the night grew almost uncanny. The air smelt of gunpowder and was thick with rumour. The time that was passing was made of only tense moments. A fear of uncertainty haunted everyone. It was the night of March 24, 1971.

I stood alone on the Railway Hill in the centre of Chittagong city. It was 9 pm. From a wooden house on that hill I had just sent two telephonic messages to EPR (East Pakistan Rifles) HQ at Halishahar. As arranged, the messages would be transmitted through the wireless net to all the border outposts of EPR from Shubapur in the north to Teknaf in the south. The first message "ARRANGE SOME WOOD FOR ME" was to be

followed by the second "BRING SOME WOOD FOR ME".

Both the messages were harmless and would cause no concern for the Pakistanis. But, after having sent them, as I stood alone under a clear night sky, an unknown fear chilled my spine. 'Is it simply an act of rebellious romanticism ? Am I trying to do the impossible ? The inevitable is to happen. It is only a matter of time.' My thoughts were interrupted. An autorickshaw clambered up the slope and halted. Out came two Bengali army officers, a Colonel and a Major. We moved under a tree and sat down.

"You should not do anything now," the Colonel told me in a low voice.

"Why ?" I enquired.

"They won't do anything serious against us. After all, there is world opinion which they cannot overlook."

"But they do not care much for world opinion. And we have already reached a stage where we can't trust them any more."

They kept quiet--absorbed in deep thinking. The Colonel concentrated on his injured hand which was in a sling. The Major lit a cigarette. Some tea and snacks came from the wooden house but none could take anything. Tension had killed our appetite.

"You see," the Colonel started again,"a political dialogue is on and we have heard of some sort of settlement being reached by tomorrow or the day after. You cannot undertake any action which would spoil everything."

"Suppose I do not stop my men ?"

"That will be a mutiny, a coup, a revolution. Call it whatever you like. If you succeed, it's good. If you fail, you know what your fate is."

"We have to take some calculated risk," I argued. "We must act. We must hit them before being hit. It has to be now or never. Otherwise, they will butcher us all. They are prepared for a genocide."

"Do not worry," the Major joined in, "they will not go to that extent."

"I also think so," the Colonel added, "and you must stop your men from any immediate action."

Unwillingly I moved to the telephone and asked my men at Halishahar to treat my second message cancelled for the time being. I did not cancel the first.

"Aren't you wrongly trusting them at this juncture of our history ?" I implored. "They will betray your trust."

"Even then the extreme steps you are prepared for cannot be taken merely on presumptions and suppositions," said the Colonel.

"But we may have to pay a heavy price if we do not take a calculated risk," I tried to impress upon them again. "And there is enough evidence about their intentions. Why has Brigadier Majumder been replaced by a West Pakistani—Brigadier Ansari ? Why are they killing our people indiscriminately near the jetty ? Must the arms and ammunition be unloaded from MV SWAT ? Where is the enemy ? Is it not us ? Do you think all those aircraft coming every night from West

Pakistan are bringing oranges and maltas and nothing else ?"

There was a painful silence for some time. I was almost certain that the discussions would be futile. For any officer fully tuned to the rigid, disciplined and regimented life in the army an action of rising in arms is unthinkable—unless forced to do so by circumstances. The two officers who were trying to prevent me from taking up arms were justified from their point of view. They both had clean service records in the Pakistan Army. They could not sensibly do anything that would jeopardise not only their career but would even take them to the gaol. They were thus admirably cautious and calculative. I was not surprised when the Colonel put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Rafiq, you understand the reasons for which we are to be so cautious. What you are trying to do with your EPR soldiers is not only risky for you all but is also likely to jeopardise the future of Bengali officers in the Pakistan Army. They will always suspect every Bengali in the Army. At this stage we cannot take up arms merely on suspicion. And alone, you may not be successful."

"I will be successful. The Pakistan Army's strength in Chittagong is roughly three hundred soldiers. I have fifteen hundred EPR men under my command. With this force, Chittagong can be kept under control for quite some time. In the mean time the political leaders will be able to contact friendly countries and get necessary help," I suggested to them.

"Even then, restrain yourself. I am hopeful that everything will be all right," the Colonel spoke softly.

"Our absence may create suspicion. Let us move," the Major reminded the Colonel.

I made a last attempt and said, "You are just allowing them the opportunity to hit us first."

"Do not worry. They will not go to that extent."

"It cannot be otherwise. They will," I shouted. My voice was drowned in the noise of the autorickshaw engine. In complete disgust and despair I sank into a cane chair. "Next time I shall act alone. only with my EPR troops. The people will join us," I muttered to myself.

Piercing the silence of the night came frequent sounds of firing from the direction of the port. It was so far off that the dying cries of the Bengalis could not be heard. I left that place. It was late at night. "They will not go to that extent" was still ringing in my ears.

"There is nothing they cannot do," I wrote in my diary that night, "and we will not be able to absolve ourselves of the responsibility for not striking the Pakistanis."

Within only twentyfour hours new history was in the making. That was the night of March 25, 1971. One of the two officers, Lt Colonel M.R. Chowdhury, was killed by the Pakistan Army inside Chittagong cantonment. They were not worth the trust he had in them. Troops of 20 Baluch Regiment killed him brutally. The other officer, Major Ziaur Rahman, was also about to meet

the same fate. He was on his way to the port to supervise unloading of arms and ammunition from MV SWAT and bringing them to the cantonment. The Pakistanis planned to kill him there in the port.

Elsewhere, the volcano had erupted. It was man against monster ; the just against the unjust.

III THE YEARS OF TREACHERY AND EXPLOITATION

The tales of the days when the Bengalis ruled themselves and enjoyed the fruits of their hard labour are of so distant a past that they have lost even historical significance and survive only as myths and legends. For many generations the people in this region in particular were subjected to the indignity and oppression of the British colonial rule. But the dream of freedom never faded away from the mind of the people. On many occasions they tried to rise against the British but failed. And every such attempt invited greater wrath of the rulers and greater sufferings for the people.

Finally, the British left this subcontinent in August 1947 creating in the process two separate nation states, India and Pakistan. Divided by 1200 miles of Indian territory, Pakistan was composed of two wings, the east and the west. East Pakistan was dominated by the Bengalis and West Pakistan by the Punjabis.

Muslims were in a majority in both the wings. But except for religion the people of the two wings had nothing else in common.

The creation of Pakistan, however, brought no hope of emancipation for the suffering people of East Pakistan. There was in fact no reason for them to rejoice. It was only a change of masters or, to be more precise, a change of protectors of the evils of colonial rule.

The cultural, emotional and racial differences of the two peoples were so sharp and vivid that no reconciliation was at all possible. Of course no sincere efforts were made for the fusion of the two peoples and their thoughts. With the passage of time the differences were aggravated by the racial chauvinism of the West Pakistanis. East Pakistan was denied equal rights and status and was being used as a colony by the West Pakistanis who controlled the armed forces, the bureaucracy, and the political and economic spheres of Pakistan. The exploitation and deprivation made the people of East Pakistan seethe in anger and frustration. But this time history was moving faster.

Within a few months of the birth of Pakistan, its founder, Mr Mohammad Ali Jinnah, told the people in Dacca that Urdu alone would be the state language of Pakistan. The valiant students of East Pakistan rose in protest and thus began the historic language movement.

The Bengali students held a mass demonstration on February 21, 1952 demanding Bengali to be accepted as a state language of Pakistan. To suppress this juts

demand of the people, the rulers of Pakistan used their armed might. Police opened fire indiscriminately on the demonstrators. About 20 persons were killed and more than 100 injured. The streets of Dacca were smeared with the blood of the martyrs. The movement gained momentum and spread throughout East Pakistan. The Bengalis felt that the West Pakistanis were trying to force on them a cultural domination. Few perhaps realised that with that bloodshed of 1952 the new-born state of Pakistan had in fact started bleeding to death. And it was in this language movement that the Bengali nationalism took its birth on the soil of Pakistan.

The language movement continued unabated till 1954 when the Constituent Assembly was compelled to recognise Bengali as a state language.

The movement added a new dimension to the political scene of Pakistan. It also left a very deep impression on the minds of the younger generation and imbued them with a spirit of nationalism.

Elections to the provincial assembly in East Pakistan took place in March 1954. The parties opposed to the ruling Muslim League formed a United Front under the leadership of A. K. Fazlul Haque, H. S. Suhrawardy and Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani. They approached the electorate with a 21-point manifesto. In essence, the manifesto wanted to uphold the rights and fulfil the aspirations of the Bengalis.

In the contest, the people voted overwhelmingly in favour of the United Front. On April 3, 1954 a United

Front government was formed with A. K. Fazlul Haque as Chief Minister.

The central government sitting at Karachi could not relish the victory of the United Front and was determined to prevent the implementation of the 21-point programme.

On the basis of certain incorrect reports the Pakistan Government declared A.K. Fazlul Haque a traitor alleging that he was planning to create an independent East Pakistan. Fazlul Haque refuted the charges publicly. But the central government paid no attention. Centre's aim was not to allow a pro-Bengali ministry to function. Iskander Mirza, Defence Secretary to the central government, was sent as the Governor of East Pakistan. On May 30, 1954 he dissolved the legislative assembly, dismissed the United Front government and proclaimed Governor's rule in the province. Mass arrests of opposition political workers were made. Fazlul Haque and his cabinet members were kept under house arrest. The first attempt of the Bengalis to have a ministry of their own choice through which they could strive to fulfil their aspirations suffered a serious set-back.

The history of Pakistan has been one of political intrigues, betrayal and treachery. In October 1951, Ghulam Mohammad, once a Punjabi civil servant, became Governor General of Pakistan and Khwaja Nazimuddin, an East Pakistani, was appointed Prime Minister after the assassination of Liaquat Ali Khan. In April 1953 Ghulam Mohammad dismissed Nazimuddin and appoint-

ed another East Pakistani, Mohammad Ali of Bogra, Prime Minister. Nazimuddin was dismissed summarily because some of his constitutional proposals were thought to be aimed at curbing Punjabi domination.

In October 1954 Ghulam Mohammad dissolved the Constituent Assembly simply because it had passed certain bills in September curtailing the powers of the Governor General. After the dissolution of the Assembly a new cabinet was formed in which General Ayub Khan, Commander-in-Chief of the Army, became the Defence Minister. Mohammad Ali of Bogra continued to be the Prime Minister and the new cabinet was responsible only to the Governor General.

In August 1955 Ghulam Mohammad retired on the ground of ill health and Iskander Mirza became the Acting Governor General. Next month he became the Governor General. In August that year Mohammad Ali of Bogra resigned and Chaudhri Mohammad Ali, another former civil servant from the Punjab, became Prime Minister with a new cabinet. Ayub Khan was dropped from this cabinet.

In September 1956, H. S. Suhrawardy became the Prime Minister replacing Chaudhri Mohammad Ali.

In October 1957 Chundrigar replaced Suhrawardy and stayed in office for 59 days. Then came Malik Feroze Khan Noon.

In East Pakistan, Ataur Rahman Khan's cabinet was dismissed by the Governor, A. K. Fazlul Haque,

on March 31, 1958. Immediately afterwards Iskander Mirza dismissed Fazlul Haque.

Abu Hussain Sarkar replaced Ataur Rahman only for 12 hours and Ataur Rahman was back to power again.

On June 20, 1958 Abu Hussain Sarkar came to power again but only for four days. For two months thereafter East Pakistan was under President's rule. Finally Ataur Rahman was reinstated as Chief Minister.

The first attempt to frame a constitution for Pakistan was made in 1949 and a committee was appointed for the purpose. The committee produced a number of drafts and made several amendments. Finally, a constitution was prepared and it was to be adopted on December 25, 1954. But with the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly in October 1954 by Ghulam Mohammad the adoption of the constitution was shelved for an indefinite period. However, that constitution would not have in any way satisfied the Bengalis who were in a majority in Pakistan. It did not provide for their due representation to the centre although it was their just and democratic right.

It was during Iskander Mirza's rule that a scheme was carefully prepared to ensure permanent domination of the affairs of Pakistan by the Punjabis. Known as the one unit plan for West Pakistan the scheme provided for abolition of any separate identity of the provinces of West Pakistan so that a united West Pakistan could effectively confront East Pakistan.

In January 1956, the draft constitution was published. By the end of February, discussions and debates were complete and the constitution was promulgated on March 23, 1956. Iskander Mirza was elected the first President under the new constitution.

But the constitution did not satisfy the Bengalis. It denied, among other things, autonomy to East Pakistan as envisaged and pledged in the Lahore Resolution of 1940.

Elections under the new constitution were to be held in November 1957 but were postponed till 1958.

On October 7, 1958 Iskander Mirza dramatically proclaimed martial law throughout Pakistan and appointed General Ayub Khan the chief martial law administrator. The constitution was abrogated, the central and provincial governments were dismissed and the assemblies were dissolved. Within 20 days Iskander Mirza was made to quit in favour of Ayub Khan. Thus Ayub Khan came to power through a military intrigue with no sanction of law or constitution.

By banning all political activities under different pretexts, Ayub imposed his own political philosophy on the people. Through presidential orders, ordinances and martial law regulations, he introduced many repressive laws to eliminate effectively all opposition and all political nonconformists. Popular public leaders were imprisoned or disqualified and their movements were restricted. All meetings and demonstrations were forbidden and the political parties were banned.

Ayub introduced a new system of democracy known as 'Basic Democracy'. The system did not permit full and vigorous participation of the people in national affairs. As such it did not arouse any enthusiasm amongst the Bengalis who were politically more sensitive and conscious.

In 1962, Ayub decided to give the country a constitution. This he did only after consolidating his own position. He ensured that the 80,000 basic democrats of Pakistan showed their confidence in his leadership through the ballot. Ayub's constitution came into force in June 1962.

The constitution distinguished itself by denying the people their right to popular representation. All powers were vested in the President. He could do or undo anything and he was not answerable to anyone. With the passage of time it became clear to all that Ayub Khan was preparing grounds for his becoming the life-long ruler of Pakistan. He had already taken necessary steps to crush forces that were opposed to his scheme.

The people of East Pakistan were the main victims of Ayub's repressive policies. Bengali leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his Awami League suffered the worst. Throughout Ayub's ten-year regime Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was either in prison or his political activities were severely restricted.

There is no denying the fact that Pakistan made industrial progress during Ayub's rule. The industrial units set up in East Pakistan were, however, mostly owned

by the non-Bengalis. East Pakistan was actually being turned into a consumer market for the finished products of West Pakistan. It was deprived of its foreign exchange earnings and the exploitation went on unabated. Whenever the Bengalis voiced their rightful demands they were termed traitors, enemies of Pakistan, agents of India, and so on.

Despite the industrial progress and temporary political stability brought about by Ayub Khan, opposition to his regime began mounting and took concrete shape following the India-Pakistan war of 1965. The actions of a dictator lacking in foresight plunged the whole nation into a bloody war. At the end, all that Ayub achieved was a trip to Tashkent to sign a peace treaty.

During the Indo-Pak war, East Pakistan was virtually left at the mercy of God. This prompted Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to demand that East Pakistan ought to be made self-sufficient in defence. The only infantry division based in East Pakistan lacked its full strength as well as its integral complements of armour and artillery. Air force and navy were almost non-existent.

The nature and the causes of opposition to Ayub's regime were different in East Pakistan from those in the West. In West Pakistan the opposition was primarily due to a struggle for power. In the East, it was due mainly to economic exploitation and political repression. Attempts at cultural and racial subjugation enraged the Bengalis still more. Ayub Khan himself did not

hesitate to lash out at the Bengalis saying "......they have all the inhibitions of down-trodden races."

Early in 1966 Sheikh Mujibur Rahman placed his famous 6-point programme before a convention of the opposition parties in Lahore. The programme sought to bring about a legal and constitutional solution to the problems of the Bengalis and also those between the two wings of Pakistan.

The 6-point programme was welcomed by the Bengalis from all walks of life. Spontaneous support to the programme completely unnerved Ayub. In wild fury he got Sheikh Mujibur Rahman arrested. Many of the Awami League workers were also arrested. In protest, a general strike was called in East Pakistan for June 7, 1966. During the strike at least 10 people were killed and many more injured. Hundreds of Awami League workers were arrested. The movement for autonomy and the 6-point programme gained momentum despite all repressive actions by the government.

Meanwhile, the military junta hatched an intrigue that was to have far-reaching consequences. In January 1968 it was announced by Ayub's government that a number of Bengalis including many from the defence services would be tried for having conspired to bring about the secession of East Pakistan with India's help. A few days later Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was implicated as an accused in that notorious case nicknamed Agartala conspiracy. A special tribunal was set up for the trial.

There was a violent outburst of Bengali indignation over the trumped up charges and the farcical trial. People realised that the Agartala case was actually a product of Ayub's conspiracy to silence Mujib and to gag the voice of the Bengalis once for all. Bloody demonstrations rocked the country and between December 1968 and February 1969 more than 100 Bengalis were killed and hundreds injured or arrested by the army and the police. Finally in February 1969, Ayub was forced to withdraw the case and release Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and others unconditionally.

The demand for a constitutional regime based on adult franchise and direct elections gained tremendous public support throughout Pakistan. In the face of persistent demonstrations against his regime, Ayub called a conference of political leaders to solve the crisis. No consensus could be arrived at on the important issues of regional autonomy for the provinces, representation on the basis of population, and dismemberment of One Unit.

Meanwhile, the movement for autonomy on the basis of six points gained so much momentum in East Pakistan that Ayub could suppress it no longer. On March 25, 1969 a disillusioned and frustrated Ayub Khan stepped down and handed over power to the Army Commander-in-Chief, General Yahya Khan. Immediately, martial law was promulgated throughout Pakistan and all political activities were banned. It seemed the Pakistan Army had taken a lease to rule the country.

However, Yahya Khan soon announced that he would hold general elections in the country and hand over power to the elected representatives of the people. He also promised that he would do his utmost to remove disparity between the two wings of Pakistan and ensure that 'the benefits of planned development are shared equitably by all Pakistanis wherever they may be living'. The ban on political activities was lifted in January 1970. Elections to the National Assembly were scheduled for October 1970 and subsequently postponed till December that year.

But Yahya, like his predecessors, was there only to look after the interest of West Pakistan. He realised that if in any manner the Awami League could come to power, the West Pakistanis would no longer be able to exploit the Bengalis. Although he made many promises to pacify the Bengalis it was proved later that right from the beginning he had set himself on a course of deception and pretension. Under no circumstances could he allow a pro-Bengali party to come to power and on that he could surely count on the full support of the West Pakistani political parties.

Finally before allowing the elections to be held Yahya wanted to make sure that the Awami League would not be in a majority in the Assembly. The military and other intelligence agencies of the government were asked to assess the prospects of Awami League's winning the national elections. This instruction was issued secretly, mainly to the non-Bengali officers. Misled by their

personal contempt for the Bengalis and the Awami League they prepared biased reports and derived pleasure in reporting that the Awami League could not hope even to get 40 percent of the seats in East Pakistan. Even many Bengali officers sent up similar reports in order to put on official record their contempt for the Awami League to be able to gain favour from their West Pakistani superiors.

To Yahya Khan and his advisers the reports were a source of great consolation. Even if the Awami League captured 50 percent of the seats, remaining 50 percent of the elected representatives could be made to join or support pro-West-Pakistan parties, if need be, through coercion and threat. Thus the western wing would still be able to dominate the national scene.

But the results of the elections of December 1970 came as a rude shock to Yahya Khan when it was found that despite all the odds Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his Awami League won 160 of the 162 National Assembly seats from East Pakistan.

Prior to the elections, one of the worst disasters in recorded history ravaged East Pakistan on November 12. A dreadful cyclone and the accompanying tidal bore took the toll of a million Bengali lives and hundreds of thousands of people were rendered homeless and destitute. During this great calamity Yahya's government proved 'cruelly callous' to the sufferings of the people. When the entire world came forward with assistance almost nothing moved from West Pakistan in aid of the suffering Bengalis.

The President of Pakistan visited the affected areas after 13 days and that too after being exposed to sharp criticism. Sorrows and sufferings of the Bengalis seemed to be of no consequence to the people of West Pakistan. The victory of the Awami League in the December elections was a manifestation of the Bengalis' frustration and indignation.

IV SMOKE-SCREEN OF POLITICAL EXPLOSION

East Pakistan was slowly recovering from the wounds of the dreadful cyclone of November 12. The indifferent attitude of Yahya's government during the calamity had bred further suspicion in the minds of the Bengalis. Yet they were dreaming of a better future. For the first time they were likely to have a government of their own choice. There were apprehensions too. Would the rulers of Pakistan ever allow a pro-Bengali government to be formed or to function ? Would they not find some excuse or prepare grounds to delay the transfer of power or even to nullify the verdict of the people ?

On December 20, 1970 Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared that the future constitution of the country would have to be framed on the basis of the 6-point programme and that there could be no compromise on that issue. Mr Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) declared the same day that without his party's cooperation no constitution could be framed nor could any

government run at the centre. Mr Bhutto went to the extent of saying that "majority alone does not count in national politics". Obviously Mr Bhutto was opposed to the 6-point programme and declared that "if needed there could be two Pakistans and two prime ministers".

A few days later, on December 27, Bhutto threatened that if the majority party insisted on making a constitution of its own liking he would step aside but in such an event PPP would not be responsible for the consequences. No one at that time could guess what those consequences would be nor could anyone identify the source that provided him with such an immoral courage and strength to threaten the majority of the people and their wishes. Was Mr Bhutto preparing grounds for those grave consequences with the connivance of the military junta? Subsequent events of the treacherous history of Pakistan unmask Bhutto's collusion with the Army to perpetrate genocide in East Pakistan. Neither Yahya nor Bhutto can escape the responsibilities.

Preparations were afoot from January 1971 for this genocide. In the first week of January, the 9th and the 16th Divisions of the Pakistan Army were alerted to remain on stand by. These two divisions were the Pakistan Army's reserve striking force. Certain conditions were, however, to be created to justify an army build-up in the eastern wing and, at the same time, to keep the Bengalis unsuspecting of the reasons for these developments.

Towards the middle of January, Yahya with his senior staff officers visited Dacca for talks with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Although it was clear to Yahya and Bhutto that the Awami League could not afford to deviate from the fundamental issue of having a constitution on the basis of its six points, both of them kept up a pretence that 'purposeful negotiations were being pursued to end the political deadlock'. Obviously the time consumed by such discussions was needed by the Army to build up its striking force in East Pakistan. Yahya left Dacca saying he was satisfied with the discussions and did not hesitate to mention Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the 'future Prime Minister of Pakistan'.

It was interesting that from Dacca he went straight to Bhutto's home at Larkana on a duck-shooting trip. Besides other generals, Yahya was joined by General Hamid Khan, Army Chief of Staff, and Lt-General Pirzada, Principal Staff Officer to Yahya. What discussions took place at Larkana or what agreements were arrived at will perhaps be never known. But the deceitful developments since the duck-shooting trip led slowly towards the greatest tragedy of the subcontinent.

Towards the end of January, Bhutto flew to Dacca for talks with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. During his stay he even laid a wreath at the Shaheed Minar (martyrs' memorial). This was a political ploy to play up to Bengali sentiments. His aim was to extract a promise of high office for himself and bring about a change in the Awami League stand to draft the constitution on the basis of six points. Bhutto returned home empty-handed. How

could the majority bow to the whimsical demands of a minority ?

Bhutto set on a course for a show-down. Before throwing such a challenge, public opinion had to be created in the western wing. He availed himself of a brilliant opportunity.

On January 30, an Indian airliner with passengers on board was hijacked to Lahore by the members of the so-called 'Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front' and later it was blown up. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman clearly saw motives behind this action and termed it a "deliberate attempt to create abnormal conditions aimed at sabotaging a peaceful transfer of power to the people". Contrary to this, Bhutto supported the action and promised the hijackers all assistance. Bhutto was playing on the anti-Indian sentiments of the West Pakistanis and to a great extent he succeeded in his effort. The hijacking incident served the purposes of the military junta as well.

However, Yahya announced on February 13 that the National Assembly would sit in Dacca on March 3. Two days later, on February 15, Bhutto announced in Peshawar that his party would boycott the Assembly session if the Awami League refused to accommodate his party's views on the making of a constitution. Bhutto knew very well that the Awami League could not afford to be flexible on its 6-point programme. He, therefore, chose this particular issue to strike at only to create a serious deadlock. On

February 16, Bhutto went to the extent of threatening that "anyone who goes to Dacca from West Pakistan either in khaki or in black and white does so at his own cost". Why even the people in khaki observed silence in the face of such an utterance needs no clarification when analysed in the light of authentic reports that very senior army officers were engaged on behalf of Yahya to persuade the West Pakistani members of the National Assembly to boycott the coming session of the house.

On February 15, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman voiced his fear that "a conspiracy is being hatched to delay the transfer of power". This view was shared by other Bengali leaders as well.

Meanwhile, there were rumours that Yahya was planning to make over power to General Hamid Khan because Hamid Khan was not promise-bound to transfer power to the people. But there was no need for such a move as long as Yahya could use Bhutto to create a political deadlock. It was probably on February 19 that emerging from an unusually long session with Yahya, Bhutto told newsmen that he would not allow any constitution to be framed without his party's participation.

At this time Bhutto was collecting resignations from MNAs of his party in support of a boycott although the legal framework order (LFO) under which the elections were held did not permit an elected member to resign before taking his seat in the Assembly. Yahya Khan went out of his way to help Bhutto by amending the relevant section of the LFO by a martial law decree.

The amendment, by a strange coincidence, was issued after the second day's meeting between Yahya and Bhutto. Thereafter, in the last week of February, Yahya suddenly dissolved his civilian cabinet and held a secret conference with all his governors and martial law administrators. Yahya did not offer any satisfactory explanation for the dissolution of the civilian cabinet. Bewildered Bengalis watched these developments with suspicion and caution. On or about February 22, a very high-level conference was held at the army headquarters in Rawalpindi attended by Yahya and the seniormost army generals. In that top-secret conference a final decision was taken which at a later date proved to be fatal for the Bengalis as well as for Pakistan. It was decided that power should not be handed over to the Bengalis and that they must be forced to accept all dictates from West Pakistan. The generals decided to achieve that aim through terror tactics of the worst possible nature. The generals thought that the autonomy movement in East Pakistan had been created by the politicians and a few thousand dead would be sufficient to crush it . Bhutto is reported to have expressed the same thought to some foreign journalists in March: "........The autonomy issue has been created by a few intellectuals. A few thousand dead in Dacca and East Pakistan will be quiet soon." Even Tikka Khan is reported to have suggested to Yahya, "Give me one week's time. I will bring back normalcy in East Pakistan." Only Admiral Ahsan, Governor of East Pakistan, and Lt-General Shahabzada Yaqub, chief of Eastern Command and martial law administrator, expressed their

inability to carry out such a genocide of innocent people. But sane people had no place at the upper echelon of the government at that time and, consequently, both these officers were removed from their posts. Major General Rao Farman Ali, civil affairs adviser to Ahsan, went to the extent of hinting to the Governor just after the conference that "we know how to push our way through and we will do that at all costs."

On February 26, Bhutto held yet another meeting with Yahya in Karachi. Two days later Bhutto asked for a postponement of the National Assembly session. Bhutto wanted others to believe that the postponement was necessary to facilitate further discussion with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on the fundamental issue of constitution making. Bhutto threatened that if his demand was not met West Pakistan would be rocked by popular agitation from 'Khyber to Karachi'. Surprisingly, Yahya found nothing grave in Bhutto's threat. The first batch of troops arrived in Dacca by a Boeing aircraft of the Pakistan International Airlines on the night of February 28 under strict security cover. Tanks were being brought to Dacca from other cantonments. Immediately on arrival these were put on soft tracks for use on the city roads.

From next day onward, troop movement by air from the western wing to the east became a regular nightly feature. In peace time such moves cannot take place in a day or two over such a long distance of more than four thousand miles by air—especially after the ban on overflights by India following the blowing up of the hijacked Indian aircraft. Such a troop movement entails

lengthy and unavoidable administrative and logistic preparations at the despatching as well as the receiving ends. A backward calculation of time may show that the units which moved from Kharian and Quetta cantonments received orders to move at least two to three weeks earlier. It will be intriguing to note that, taking a minimum period of two weeks, the army units must have received their movement orders even before February 13 when Yahya announced that the National Assembly session was to be held on March 3.

What followed was a series of actions and counteractions portraying betrayal, mistrust and fatal mistakes, as if in a stage-play, leading to the inevitable finale on the night of March 25, 1971.

Who could understand the nature and meaning of that tragedy that lurked in the smoke-screen of a political explosion?

V HISTORY IN THE MAKING

Preparations for the inaugural session of the National Assembly were almost complete. Yahya Khan was in Karachi enroute to Dacca for the session. It was Monday, March 1, 1971. Suddenly at 1 pm Radio Pakistan transmitted Yahya's infamous statement that owing to "regrettable confrontation between the leaders of East and West, the National Assembly session has to be postponed to a later date." This was Bhutto's demand

and Yahya complied with it obediently without even consulting Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. There was no need to consult him since the deadlock was a product of Yahya-Bhutto conspiracy.

A thousand miles away in East Pakistan, the statement created an impact that shook the very foundation of Pakistan. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared: "This cannot go unchallenged. You will see history made if the conspirators fail to come to their senses." Angry waves of demonstration swept the whole of East Pakistan. The Awami League called for a provincewide hartal till March 6 and a mass rally for March 7 in Dacca to be addressed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The Bengalis identified the conspirators and the entire people got united as never before in history. They were prepared for all the consequences—however grave those might be. Leaflets in Dacca cried, "Six points No, one point (*i. e.* independence) Yes." As the majority in Pakistan the people of East Pakistan had all the rights to decide their own fate and that of Pakistan. Other leaflets urged the Bengalis to unite for a greater struggle and requested the Bengali leaders not to compromise with the Punjabi betrayers.

From March 2 onwards the civil rule in East Pakistan came to a standstill. The non-cooperation movement had begun. Even the Bengali bureaucracy joined the movement in support of the people. Support also came from the members of the East Pakistan Rifles and the Police when they refused to fire on the demonstrating Bengalis. The upsurge brought the entire Bengali nation

to a direct confrontation with the Pakistan Army. In Dacca the Army killed two young demonstrators on March 2. Then came the turn of Chittagong and other places.

March 3, 1971. In the early hours of the day, a procession was heading towards the city centre of Chittagong raising nationalistic slogans. When the procession reached the Wireless colony—a non-Bengali population area of the city—some unknown persons opened fire with rifles and physically assaulted the demonstrators. The Bengali hutments in the adjacent areas were set on fire and many people were roasted alive. News of this incident spread immediately and enraged the city people. There was serious breach of law and order. EPR was called out to assist the civil administration. It was around 9 o'clock in the morning when I reached the Wireless colony. By that time serious rioting was reported from other non-Bengali areas of the city—Ispahani colony, Ambagan colony, Kulshi colony and Sardar Nagar.

I found the Superintendent of Police, Mr Shamsul Hoq, with his police force at the Wireless colony. And to my utter surprise I found troops of 20th Baluch Regiment on duty there.

"Who requisitioned army assistance?" I asked Mr Hoq.

"No one," he whispered. "Many have been killed. Some of the injured have been sent to hospital."

"All Bengalis?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied in a feeble voice. "From some of those houses they fired on the procession with rifles before making the physical assault."

"Have we arrested any?"

"Not yet," he replied. "The army has arrested about one hundred innocent Bengalis."

Nearby, a West Pakistani Major from 20th Baluch Regiment and his troops walked past, passing oblique glances at me and my troops of EPR. It was clear what the West Pakistanis wanted to do and how much our lives mattered to them. But there was not much time to think, to ponder or to protest.

Hospital sources confirmed that all the dead and the injured had bullet wounds. (In those days rifles were not available with the civilians.) That the troops from 20th Baluch were living in civil dress with the non-Bengalis had earlier been reported to us. The incident of March 3 confirmed those reports and also the fact that the disguised troops were all armed with rifles.

The events in East Pakistan alarmed Yahya Khan. He had not calculated that there would be so violent an outburst of anger. So, in a move to appease the Bengalis, Yahya, on March 3, invited the leaders of all political parties to meet him in Dacca on March 10. Yahya wanted to bide his time till, as events proved, he could build up his armed strength. This he wanted to achieve by deceiving the people through conferences and meetings with the political leaders. But his first bait failed and Yahya's invitation was rejected outright by Sheikh Mujibur

Rahman as well as other political leaders from East Pakistan, now popularly called Bangladesh. In justifying rejection the Sheikh declared, "In the wake of wide-spread killing in Dacca, Chittagong and other places in Bangladesh—while the blood of the martyrs on the streets is hardly dry—this invitation comes as a cruel joke. While the military build-up continues and the harsh language of weapons still rings in our ears, the invitation for such a conference is in fact made at gun point."

The same day, Mujibur Rahman called upon the people to resort to a non-cooperation movement and directed that no one should pay any rent or tax or cooperate with the anti-people government.

He demanded that the troops must be pulled back to the barracks and power handed over to the elected representatives of the people before March 7.

True, the military build-up was continuing. Even as Yahya was sending out the invitations on March 3, a battalion of the 22nd Baluch regiment was airlifted to East Pakistan. This regiment was secreted at the EPR HQ at Peelkhana in Dacca and it started reconnaissance duties in EPR dress from the next day.

In Chittagong, after returning from the troubled spots of the city, I called a friend to my house on Sarson Road. He was an eye-specialist and prominent and reliable member of the Awami League.

"Zafar Bhai, don't you think we should prepare ourselves for emancipation?" I asked him.

For a while he kept staring at me. Then bending his head forward he whispered to me: "It is impossible to live with the Punjabis. They want to treat us like a colonial people, if need be by force. The incident of this morning leaves no doubt about that."

"In that case, let us work together. At this stage I am not sure whether other service personnel will join us. But I have about 1500 Bengali soldiers in EPR absolutely loyal to me, and with them I can keep Chittagong and the Chittagong Hill Tracts districts free for a month. In that period your party must arrange for assistance from friendly countries."

"I am with you," said Dr Zafar. "Meanwhile let me discuss with our party president of Chittagong."

It was perhaps on March 5 that a secret meeting was arranged by Dr Zafar between Mr M. R. Siddiqi, President of Chittagong Awami League, and myself. On the previous day also there were clashes between the Bengalis and the non-Bengalis at the provocation of the troops of the army. In all these incidents, the Bengalis paid a heavy price. There were more cases of death and destruction. More Bengali hutments were set on fire and in many cases people were burnt alive in their houses.

At Tongi near Dacca, two persons were killed and fifteen others injured when troops opened fire on a demonstration. Curfew was imposed in Rangpur, Saidpur, Rajshahi and many other districts. The entire people of East Pakistan were now united in their determination

to secure their rights and everyone knew that to achieve their aim they would have to pay more in blood.

It was under such conditions that I met Mr Siddiqi that night in his house.

"We must be prepared for the worst," I suggested. "It has to be a military action to rid ourselves of all exploitation and injustice. Success will depend on absolute surprise and striking the enemy before they can strike us."

"But before that we must be absolutely clear about the intentions of the army. We should not do anything without a final approval from the leader (Sheikh Mujibur Rahman)," Mr. Siddiqi said. We agreed to maintain regular contacts through Dr Zafar and Mr Siddiqi promised to discuss the matter with the leader. It was midnight when I took leave of him.

The plan had to be worked out without any further delay. Yahya was concentrating more and more on troops build-up without which he could not mount a confrontation with the Bengalis. People refused to supply or sell anything to the army who consequently had to live on supplies brought by air from the western wing. Hatred had reached its peak and the psychological break-up of Pakistan was complete. Everyone expected that on March 7 Sheikh Mujibur Rahman would proclaim independence. That would completely jeopardise Yahya's strategy in East Pakistan. To calm the situation Yahya threw another bait. In a nationwide broadcast on March 6, he announced a new date for the National Assembly

session. It would now meet on March 25. Yahya's game was to dissuade Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from proclaiming independence on March 7.

The same day Lt-General Tikka Khan was appointed Governor of East Pakistan to replace Vice-Admiral Ahsan. He was also to take over from Lt-General Shahabzada Yaqub Khan his charge as Martial Law Administrator. The reasons for these changes were debated everywhere. But, for those who knew Tikka Khan as the 'Butcher of Baluchistan' there was no doubt about the course of action to be taken by Yahya. Ahsan and Yaqub had refused to execute the plan of genocide but Tikka Khan would not.

On the same evening (March 6) I called a secret conference of most reliable JCOs and NCOs of EPR in my office at Halishahar. The pretext was discussion on internal security duties. We carefully avoided the presence of any non-Bengali soldier within the vicinity of my office room.

EPR then comprised of about 80 per cent Bengali and 20 per cent non-Bengali soldiers. This force of approximately eighteen thousand men all over East Pakistan was commanded by army officers who came on deputation for a period of two to three years. Unfortunately, owing to a secret policy of the government 90 per cent of the officers in EPR were West Pakistanis. These officers looked after the interest of only the non-Bengali soldiers. Bengali soldiers were deprived of the usual facilities and privileges. They were often superseded by their non-

Bengali counterparts in promotions. In matters of leave and accommodation priority was given to the non-Bengalis. Only for difficult tasks and duties in inaccessible areas Bengali soldiers were given priority. Such treatment over a period of many years had turned the Bengali soldiers hostile towards the West Pakistanis. The posting of a Bengali officer was, therefore, deemed by the troops as 'God-sent'. Whenever they got a chance the soldiers used to burst out with their tales of misery, injustice and ill-treatment with a common request at the end—"Sir, please do something for us. You are also a Bengali".

As I met the JCOs and the NCOs that evening it was evident that a fear of uncertainty and the likely horrors of the future were haunting everyone. Briefly I explained to them the serious developments that had taken place by then and the likelihood of the worst possible repression in the immediate future. I was not surprised to be told that some of the soldiers had already contacted the Awami League workers at the lower level for information and instruction. The danger was identified by all. I gave them these immediate tasks:

1. To remain vigilant and prepared for all eventualities ; if necessary for an armed struggle not only for escaping a sudden attack but also for saving the lives of as many of our own people as possible.

2. To keep a firm control over the armoury and the wireless stations of EPR.

3. To keep all the vehicles under control.

4. The field security detachment (an intelligence unit) directly under me was given the task of watching all activities in the port, airport and naval headquarter areas as well as to keep a watch on leading non-Bengali civilians.

5. Regular liaison with Dacca and, if possible, with other EPR sectors for exchange of information.

6. Removal of firing pins from weapons allotted to non-Bengali soldiers with the utmost secrecy.

Final orders of action, when such occasion would arise, were to be conveyed through two coded messages, seemingly harmless. Their meanings were explained to the responsible and reliable senior Bengali NCOs and JCOs:

a. **Arrange some wood for me:** This was a warning to remain stand-by at half an hour's notice.

b. **Bring some wood for me:** This second message was an order for all troops to arrest, and if necessary to eliminate, all hostile forces. Thereafter, our troops were to move to the city in pre-selected battle locations.

Yahya's announcement about the National Assembly session to be held on March 25 did not have the desired effect of cooling down the explosive situation. In Chittagong, political leaders visited various troubled areas and persuaded the people to maintain law and order. EPR and Police were deployed at all important places including the non-Bengali areas.

Next day, March 7, Sheikh Mujib made his historic speech in a meeting in Dacca attended by nearly a million

militant Bengalis. It was a day of great expectation. Everyone expected a proclamation of independence. His speech was to be relayed over the radio net-work but was stopped by the government at the last moment. In Dacca cantonment, the army and the airforce were battle-ready to unleash a bloodbath in case Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared independence. Artillery guns were laid with targets fixed for the meeting ground and an air-observation helicopter prepared to direct artillery shoot hovered in the sky. All that Yahya needed was an excuse ; a cause for provocation.

But Sheikh Mujib did not give that opportunity to Yahya. In that historic speech, the best ever heard, the Sheikh revealed his mind to the people. His message needed to be decoded with wit. He asked his people to be prepared for more sacrifices and said, "This is a struggle for freedom and emancipation."

To Yahya's announcement about the new date for the Assembly session Mujib's response was conditional. He demanded

(a) immediate withdrawal of martial law ;

(b) return of all military personnel to the barracks ;

(c) a halt to firing upon civilians and a judicial enquiry into the earlier killings ;

(d) transfer of power to the elected representatives of the people ;

(e) immediate halt to military build-up and

(f) the responsibility of maintaining law and order to be given to the EPR and the Police who would be assisted by Awami League volunteers.

From March 8 the movement took a definite shape. The Awami League issued clear directives which were followed by everyone blindly. The people were asked not to pay taxes till their demands were met. Sheikh Mujib asked all government officers to take orders directly from him. Yahya's authority in East Pakistan was completely lost in the wake of such an unprecedented movement. Even the Chief Justice of Dacca High Court refused to administer the oath of office to Governor Tikka Khan.

After Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's speech of March 7 and his directives to the people the next course of action was left to Yahya.

At this stage Yahya was persuaded by a number of West Pakistani political leaders to reach an understanding with the Bengali leader. A meeting of such political leaders was held in Lahore on March 13 but the PPP and Qayyum Khan's faction of the Muslim League did not join. Bhutto was following a different policy but, no doubt, keeping pace with Yahya.

On March 14, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared firmly that "the spirit of freedom of Bangladesh cannot be extinguished."

The policy followed by the military junta of Yahya alienated the people more and more and the two wings drifted away from each other rapidly. As the military

build-up continued, Yahya gave the excuse that such a build-up was necessitated by a similar build-up by India along the borders. Our sources confirmed this excuse to be a blatant lie. Moreover, the troops that were arriving from the west by C-130 transport aircraft and the PIA Boeings were not moved to take up any defence along the borders. During this time two ships carrying food-grains for East Pakistan were diverted from the high seas to Karachi without any satisfactory explanation from the authorities.

In Chittagong, the intelligence unit of EPR that was given the task of collecting information confirmed that a certain civil jeep was carrying arms and ammunition from the naval HQ at night and delivering those to the non-Bengali people at various places in the city. The West Pakistani officers responsible were identified by my informers as Lt Taj of the Pakistan Navy and Major (Retd.) Rizvi working in Chittagong port. Even troops from special commando units of the Pakistan Army were found in batches of two or three living in non-Bengali houses. We realised what those preparations were for and who would be the targets.

Meanwhile our preparations were nearing completion. An up-to-date record showing disposition of troops deployed in various places for maintaining law and order was available along with a detailed breakdown of the number of Bengali and non-Bengali soldiers in every group. The wireless net connecting all outposts in the far-flung areas of the borders was opened for communica-

tion every half-an-hour instead of the normal schedule of every two hours. The plan was drawn and companies and platoons were formed. All the lower commanders were briefed personally by me about their tasks and battle locations. The Bengali EPR troops available at that time in Chittagong city were around six hundred in number—a reasonable figure for immediate objectives. Other tasks could be accomplished on arrival of another thousand men from the border areas. Allocation of weapons, ammunition and communication equipment was made verbally. They had only to keep mental notes and work on final orders from me.

Earlier, a courier was sent to Dacca asking the Bengali EPR troops there to remain alert and prepared for any eventuality. I sent a small note through the courier to Captain Delwar who was serving with the EPR in Dacca. He was asked to contact the seniormost Bengali army officer and to try to coordinate. When the courier returned I got a small note from Delwar hidden under the aluminium foil of a cigarette packet. It read: "Discussed with Bara Karta (Top Boss). Not willing."

VI PREPARATIONS

The serious situation created in the country exposed Bhutto to sharp criticism even from the west wing political parties except those from his own party and Qayyum Khan's Muslim League. But Bhutto's game was not yet over.

On March 15, Bhutto demanded that power should be transferred to the majority party of each wing separately. Bhutto's proposal was condemned by most of the political parties even in the western wing. Yahya was, however, undisturbed. The new proposal contained elements of a serious controversy. Yahya needed such controversy to create grounds for lengthy discussions and negotiations yielding more time which he urgently needed. On March 15, Yahya arrived in Dacca for a further dialogue with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Along with Yahya a number of generals also arrived in Dacca to give final touches to the army's action plan.

Yahya was taking everything in a casual manner and was not in a hurry to meet Sheikh Mujib. Their first meeting lasting two hours and a half took place the next day. "Do not ask me any more question," was the reply from Sheikh Mujib when asked by newsmen whether the atmosphere was friendly or not. Similar was the atmosphere of the second meeting on March 17. It lasted only an hour.

As the discussions were being held in Dacca, Bhutto kept up the tension by issuing threatening statements from Karachi. He said, any compromise worked out without his concurrence would be resisted. Yahya digested all these threatening statements as if those were not meant for him at all.

After dusk on March 17, a number of young Bengali army officers moved in two private cars towards Chittagong University where I wanted to hold secret discussions

with them. The house of a university professor was selected for the purpose. The officers were Capt Haroon, Capt Khaleq, Capt Oli and Lt Shamsher Mobin. Our discussions were very brief and I found that all of them were aware of the graveness of the situation and the likelihood of serious repression by the Pakistan Army. The officers were all willing to go in for armed resistance against any repressive actions by the army.

Capt Haroon was my most trusted officer posted to 17 Wing, EPR, with HQ at Kaptai. I had called him to my house in the first week of March for briefing and discussions. Final briefing and operational tasks were given in the second week when I disclosed to him the meaning of the codes. He was given the task of all operations in Kaptai area with instruction to join me later in Chittagong city. My battle HQ was to be in the area of the Railway Hill.

Yahya Khan found himself cooped up in the President's House in Dacca unable to move without heavy armed escorts. He was virtually a king without a kingdom. In East Pakistan nothing moved, nothing worked without orders from Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his party. Directives issued by the Awami League were the supreme laws in the land. Yahya's authority was only laughed at.

On March 18, I met Mr Siddiqi at his residence in the evening. I requested him to inform Sheikh Mujibur Rahman about our preparedness to resist any repressive action by the army. On the same day I met Maj Ziaur

Rahman and Lt Col M. R. Chowdhury to find out their reactions vis-a-vis the prevalent situation. It was clear now that the EPR and the Police would not be a party to any anti-people action by Yahya Khan. This development was understood by all when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman demanded that the responsibility of maintaining law and order should be left to EPR and Police only. I talked frankly to both these officers and understood that they would not get directly involved in any anti-people repressive action. All I requested was that they should be prepared for the worst as the situation had taken a serious turn and that they should be prepared to capture Chittagong cantonment. Without disclosing my plan of action in such an eventuality, I confided in them that the capture of all other strategic points including the airport, the naval headquarter and the port areas had been arranged and could be managed by my troops in the EPR. The capture of the cantonment could be managed by them since the only West Pakistani army unit there (20 Baluch Regiment) had a strength of about 300 men. As against this, the East Bengal Regimental Centre (EBRC) in the cantonment had a strength of more than 2000 Bengali soldiers. Col Chowdhury was a very senior officer in the centre. And 8 East Bengal Regiment of which Maj Ziaur Rahman was the seniormost Bengali officer had a strength of approximately 300 Bengali soldiers. And both the officers had distinguished service records.

On that night (March 18) I visited Mr Siddiqi again. I told him about my meeting with the Bengali army

officers and that "they would be on the side of the people." "That's fine," he remarked.

Everything, however, was not moving so fine. The political dialogue in Dacca was moving painfully slow. On March 18, Bhutto declared in Karachi that no useful purpose would be served if he went to Dacca to participate in the discussions.

On March 19, when asked about the progress of the talks Sheikh Mujibur Rahman said, "I hope for the best and am prepared for the worst." This was a non-committal answer implying perhaps a more serious deadlock.

On that day at Joydevpur about 20 miles away from Dacca there was a confrontation between the Bengalis and a detachment of the Pakistan Army. Two people were killed and many injured when troops opened fire. A curfew was imposed at Joydevpur. There was no explanation as to why the army had at all moved to that area when they were supposed to remain within the cantonment.

The following day a number of West Pakistani leaders arrived in Dacca. The National Assembly session was very near. The same day a meeting of all army officers posted in Chittagong was held at the circuit house. This was presided over by Brigadier Majumder, a Bengali officer who was Commandant of the East Bengal Regimental Centre and appointed sub-administrator, martial law, Chittagong sector, on March 4.

"It is painful," he addressed us, "to see even the army officers mistrusting each other. It has come to my notice

that some West Pakistani officers have replaced their Bengali batmen. Same is the report about some Bengali officers. This is most unfortunate. There is no place for regionalism in the army."

What he said was true. Even Bengali staff officers having nationalistic leanings were replaced by pro-Pakistani officers.

As the Brigadier spoke the audience exchanged grave and suspicious glances across the conference table. But the gap was too wide to be bridged.

Soon after the conference Lt Colonel Fatmi, commanding officer of 20 Baluch Regiment, called me for a cup of tea. "You see," he said to me, "we are all part of a team in the army. We should not have any misunderstanding about each other." He was referring to a bitter exchange of words between us over the incident at the Wireless colony. There, in the presence of the Commissioner of Chittagong Division I had accused Col Fatmi of having used his troops in civil dress for killing Bengalis.

Col Fatmi opened a brief case full of bundles of hundred-rupee notes. "I believe your Sheikh Saheb has issued some directives prohibiting any flow of money out of East Pakistan," he said with a hawkish smile. Without awaiting my reply he continued, "It matters least to us. I am sending these to my homeland."

That night I secretly dropped in at the residence of Col Qadir—a Bengali officer of the Engineers Corps in the Pakistan Army and on deputation to the Oil and Gas

Development Corporation. Dr Zafar went along with me.

"Your items are ready and available whenever you need. Trained personnel are also available," he told me quietly. This was in response to a request made to him for supplying some explosives and trained personnel.

Next day, on March 20, the civil authorities in Chittagong decided to remove arms and ammunition from the shops. This decision, actually coming from martial law HQ at Dacca, evoked more suspicion in the minds of the people. In the early hours of March 21, when policemen were sent to remove arms and ammunition from the shops at Anderkilla, they were confronted by an angry mob. Under no circumstances would the people allow these to be removed. Later on, a compromise was reached. It was decided that the shops would remain sealed with double locks. One key would remain with the Awami League leader, who represented the people, and the other would be with the civil authorities.

Mr Bhutto arrived in Dacca on March 21 and within two hours of his arrival he joined Yahya in a secret discussion which lasted two hours. Prior to that Yahya had an unscheduled talk with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman for an hour. Next day, on March 22, a joint meeting was held between Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Yahya and Bhutto. The result was a further postponement of the National Assembly session. The announcement from President's House said, "With a view to facilitating the process of enlarging areas of agreement among the

political parties, the President has decided to postpone the meeting of the National Assembly called on March 25 in consultation with political leaders of both the wings of Pakistan." The agreement, however, remained shrouded in mystery. The political smoke-screen was complete. General Hamid, Chief of Staff of the Pakistan Army, after his arrival in Dacca on March 20, was running to various cantonments. He was left with very little time.

The usual Republic Day celebrations of March 23 were cancelled and Yahya Khan kept up a pretence of being busy in discussions with the political leaders for a settlement. No outsider knew what exactly were the discussions and how much progress had been made. It was a period of utter and absolute confusion.

On March 23, I along with Dr Zafar went again to meet Mr Siddiqi at his house at night. We were all eager to know exactly what was happening in Dacca and what was the progress of the talks. We pressed Mr Siddiqi to go to Dacca and meet Sheikh Mujibur Rahman without any delay. I requested him to suggest to the Bengali leader to establish his HQ in Chittagong and also to inform him about the preparedness of my EPR troops to rise to the occasion and keep Chittagong under our control. Mr Siddiqi assured me that he would convey my message to the leader.

It was late at night when we left his house. A thin blanket of fog spread over the whole city. Next morning Mr Siddiqi left for Dacca to meet the leader.

Meanwhile, a ship, MV SWAT, had arrived at Chittagong port from West Pakistan. Despite Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's demand for putting an end to the military build-up in East Pakistan, the arrival of the ship loaded with arms and ammunition was viewed as an act of great provocation. The labourers of Chittagong port refused to allow unloading of arms and ammunition from SWAT. They realised that these arms and ammunition were likely to be used against them. Neither the army nor the labourers would budge an inch. At last, it was decided that the cargo would be unloaded but not shifted to the cantonment. Instead, it would be kept at the transit camp.

On March 24, General Hamid flew to Chittagong in a helicopter. With him was Brigadier Ansari, a West Pakistani officer. In the evening General Hamid left for Dacca and took Brigadier Majumder with him leaving Brigadier Ansari to control the affairs in Chittagong. The Bengali Brigadier's soft handling of the situation regarding unloading of arms and ammunition could not satisfy General Hamid. The newly-arrived troops from West Pakistan would not be too effective without these arms and ammunition. This prompted the removal of Brigadier Majumder. His removal and immediate replacement by Brigadier Ansari was not only dramatic but a rare event as well. The urgency of the whole affair deepened our suspicion.

Under personal supervision of Brigadier Ansari, the army started off-loading arms and ammunition from SWAT on March 24. Since the dock labourers had earlier refused

to unload, recruits from the East Bengal Regimental Centre were used for unloading. At this, Chittagong seemed to burst in anger. People set up barricades from the port up to the cantonment. Troops were deployed to keep this route open. An angry and militant mob started moving to the port areas. The army had dishonoured the agreement reached earlier. The crowd swelled to thousands. "The ammunition must be unloaded at all costs," Brigadier Ansari declared. The cost was paid by the Bengalis. The jetty area became the testing ground for genocide by the Pakistan Army. How many died, how many were injured no one will ever know. So close was the D-Day for Yahya Khan that Brigadier Ansari had to hasten unloading at all costs. Tension mounted, rumours spread like wild fire. Even my batman, an EPR sepoy, told me gloomily, "Now they will kill all of us, sir."

That night (March 24-25) I sent the coded messages to my troops from the Railway Hill. As I awaited confirmation from all the EPR posts of the receipt of my message a baby taxi drove up the hill. Col Chowdhury and Major Ziaur Rahman got down and a discussion ensued. Events forced me to postpone any action that night. This proved to be too costly a postponement.

VII THE FATEFUL NIGHT

March 25, 1971, Thursday. I was as usual in my office at 7 in the morning and found Major Iqbal (a West Pakistani officer) sitting in my office. "Rafiq, you look so tired and overworked. Why don't you go to Cox's Bazar and rest for a few days? If you want you can go today. I will persuade the Commanding Officer." True, I had not taken any leave for a number of years and 'rest' I needed badly. Yet Major Iqbal's insistence on my taking leave that very day deepened my suspicion. Politely I replied, "Thank you, sir, but you know all leave has been cancelled since January."

"I can talk to the Commanding Officer. I think he will agree," he insisted.

We all knew Major Iqbal was a pet of the Commanding Officer. But Major Iqbal's persistence to keep me out of Chittagong (in fact, out of touch with my troops) really puzzled me. I decided not to dance to his tune.

"You know, yesterday troops fired on the mob in the port area and many people were killed," I told him in a bid to divert his attention to a different topic.

"Not many," he tried to minimise. "Only one or two were injured." And then with a curious smile he said, "I hear Sheikh Mujibur Rahman has called for a general strike on March 27 to protest against army action."

"I do not know as yet." But we knew that in the port area army went on firing at random and we could hear

that from our office. Major Iqbal kept shadowing me wherever I moved within the lines of EPR HQ until I left my office at 2 pm.

A rumour was afloat that a settlement had been reached. There was no confirmation from any reliable quarter. Official radio broadcasts hinted at a political solution but this could not be relied upon. From my house, I rang up my HQ and asked the troops to remain on full alert. Then I kept pacing the lawn of my house restlessly.

At 11 am that day (March 25) an army helicopter flew to Rangpur. It carried on board Major General Janjua, Major General Mitta Khan, Major General Nazar Hussain Shah and one more general (probably General Omar). Brigadier Abdul Ali Malik, commanding 23rd Brigade stationed at Rangpur, received the generals at the helipad and they drove straight to the Brigadier's residence. Colonel Staff of HQ 14 Division carried a sealed packet. Others were empty-handed. After a few minutes they returned to the helipad and departed. The sealed packet was missing this time. It had been delivered to the Brigadier at his residence.

As the helicopter flew away, Brigadier Abdul Ali Malik called various unit commanders for a conference at the Brigade HQ. All the unit commanders were West Pakistani officers. EPR was represented by a Bengali officer, Capt Nawajesh, assistant wing commander of 10 Wing. The Brigadier did not like the presence of a Bengali officer in the conference. "Nawajesh," he told him, "you are not required in this conference.

We are going to discuss purely army affairs. You need not waste your time here. Better go and look after the internal security measures in the city."

Nawajesh left the Brigade HQ, suspicious of what he had watched at the helipad and at the HQ.

From Rangpur the helicopter flew to the cantonments at Rajshahi, Jessore, Chittagong, Comilla and finally back to Dacca in the evening. By then it was known that M.M. Ahmed, chairman of the Planning Commission and Yahya's chief negotiator, had slipped out of Dacca in the morning. Yahya left the President's House in the city and moved to Dacca cantonment. The EPR troops on duty in the city were withdrawn and concentrated at Peelkhana. They were asked to deposit their arms in the kote. The troops became suspicious but they had no alternative. Peelkhana was being controlled by 22 Baluch Regiment (all West Pakistani personnel). By dusk that day as all the EPR troops deposited their arms in the kote, 22 Baluch quietly took over the EPR signal communication centre and put non-Bengali signals personnel on duty. Troops of 22 Baluch started manning the gates and no one was allowed either to enter or to leave Peelkhana. In the city of Dacca there were whispers that the talks had failed. People rushed back home expecting curfew at any time. All that the people apprehended was tougher martial law, violations of curfew and some butchery by the Pakistan Army . But no one could imagine that they were to face a genocide.

It was impossible for anyone except the senior West Pakistani army officers at different stations to know

anything about the plan. The blueprint for 'Operation Genocide' had been delivered in sealed packets by the generals who flew in that special helicopter from Dacca. The packets contained the operational orders for 'genocide' up to the minutest details—signed by the Chief of General Staff, General Hamid Khan, and authenticated by Yahya Khan. Soon after receiving that sealed packet hectic activities started in every cantonment.

In Chittagong, Dr Zafar came to my house at 4-30 pm. Sitting on the lawn of my house we discussed all possibilities. But we could not receive any reliable information regarding the situation at Dacca. At 8 pm Dr Zafar left for the Awami League office to find out if they had received any information from Dacca. I went in to have an early dinner with a friend, Capt Muslimuddin. We had just started taking our meal when Dr Zafar returned with an Awami League worker. It was 8-30 pm.

"Pakistan Army has started moving out from Dacca cantonment with tanks. The talks have apparently failed." They could speak no more. Both were tense and excited.

"Are you giving me the correct information ?" I asked Dr Zafar.

"Yes. We are just coming from Mr Siddiqi's place where a closed door session of our party is being held. Mr Siddiqi received that information from Dacca and asked us to convey it to you immediately. It is your show now."

I was still nibbling at rice. For a while, I remained indecisive and absorbed in deep thought while my visitors kept their eyes fixed on me with eagerness and expectation.

If the army had started moving to the city with tanks surely they meant some serious business. We should expect the worst. From March 3 they had been killing our people indiscriminately. On March 24 alone they killed more than 20 civilians in Chittagong port. Besides, we had confirmed reports of such killing from all over Bangladesh—Dacca, Khulna, Jessore, Rangpur, Saidpur, Rajshahi. And that evening (March 25) something very strange had happened. Both the EPR wireless sets at Chittagong lost contact with the control station at Peelkhana, Dacca. This never happened earlier and it deepened my suspicion.

These thoughts crossed my mind in quick succession. Having served in the Pakistan Army I knew the atrocities those people were capable of committing, once let loose anywhere. With the news of the army's moving on to the scene, Yahya's sudden departure from the President's House and failure of the talks, we apprehended that a massacre would start at any moment and on an unprecedented scale. We suspected that even the Bengali army personnel might not escape their wrath.

Something from within gave me immense courage and strength. Something from within demanded of me that to save my life as well as the lives of our people we must meet that evil force with strength and determination.

I took the most difficult and nerve-wrecking decision which could lead me to freedom or to the firing squad.

I told Dr Zafar, "I along with my troops of EPR will fight the Pakistan Army to save our people and to free them. Move to Sholashahar and the cantonment and tell all Bengali soldiers to join us. Meet me in my tactical HQ on the Railway Hill."

Immediately, I dialled Halishahar EPR HQ where the Bengali JCOs were awaiting my orders. "Just now send the second code message to all stations. Control the kote. Do not allow the West Pakistani soldiers to come out of their rooms. Put some troops in defence against naval HQ. I am coming shortly."

Thereafter, I instructed my batman Sattar to remove certain important documents to a friend's house and asked him to remain available on telephone. Ahmed, my old cook, asked innocently, "Sir, you have not eaten at all. Was it bad cooking ?" Before I could say anything, I saw Sattar winking at Ahmed to move back to the kitchen. As a soldier he could understand that we were heading for something big and difficult.

It was 8-45 pm. I left my house on Sarson Road in Chittagong for the last time. Ahead of me was a dream—a dream that I had cherished like others for a long time. A dream full of uncertainty. "Will the other army personnel join in th efight? Will the Sheikh manage to escape from Dacca ? Shall I ever be a free man ? Can I ever come back to see a free people ?" These and many such thoughts kept haunting me ceaselessly.

A gentle breeze was blowing from the Bay of Bengal. We drove down to the Wireless colony, the first target for action. My driver Kalam and the two escorts in the rear seats were all tense and biting their lips. The streets were all deserted. As we came close to the Wireless colony, tension drew sharper. The jeep negotiated a narrow railway crossing with a jerk and my thoughts were interrupted. I could see the antenna of the wireless station protected by barbed wire fencing all around. I asked the driver to slow down. No one should sense anything unusual. Success there in the Wireless colony was vital. Four of us were to tackle and neutralise a platoon of EPR on internal security duty commanded by Capt Hayat and Subedar Hashmat (West Pakistanis). There were three other West Pakistani soldiers in that place as per my record and the rest of the troops were all Bengalis. Similarly there were other EPR platoons at various parts of the city. But the one at the Wireless colony was the only platoon on duty with a West Pakistani officer in command.

My jeep halted at the gate and the Bengali sentry allowed the jeep to move in. We finally stopped in front of Capt Hayat's room where a sentry was standing on guard outside.

I moved to Hayat's room cautiously. In a few minutes something serious was going to happen. Either success or a bullet through my head. If the latter happened there was no other Bengali officer in EPR Chittagong to lead the troops. This thought perplexed me.

I knocked at the door gently and talked in a very friendly and sober tone, "Hello Hayat, are you sleeping ?"

"I had just gone to bed, sir." He recognised my voice and put on the light. Through the curtains I could see him taking out something from under the pillow and hiding it under his sleeping suit. "How is everything ?" I asked as I waited for him to open the door. "Sab thik thak hai (everything is O K)," he replied and opened the door.

"Please come in, sir, and...," he wanted to say something when I interrupted pointing my sten gun at his chest. "I am sorry, Hayat, I have to arrest you," I said in a low voice. Quickly he tried to bring out his pistol. Driver Kalam darted out and hit Hayat on the head. We tied his hands and mouth, cut the telephone line and sent for Subedar Hashmat who was sleeping in a barrack close by.

Subedar Hashmat came dozing and hardly had he finished saluting me when Kalam and other escorts jumped on him. Hashmat was arrested and his hands and mouth tied in no time.

The sentry outside Hayat's room was watching the mysterious events bewildered. Suddenly he ran towards a hillock. "He is a West Pakistani," Kalam whispered and immediately a bullet whizzed past. We ducked down. The troops started running out from their barracks.

"The sentry has fired by mistake," I spoke with all the normalcy and ease that I could gather. "Fall in, Everyone."

The other three West Pakistani soldiers surrendered. The sentry who had fired left his weapon and disappeared. From that platoon I sent ten persons to go and protect my would-be tactical HQ on the Railway Hill. Others were to join me at Halishahar. A few messengers were sent in different directions to contact the isolated platoons so that everyone could join me at Halishahar for final instructions without wasting much time.

A difficult task was completed with great success, thanks to driver Kalam and the two escorts who risked their lives to save me. I shall ever remain grateful to those brave soldiers.

As we drove out of the wireless station I looked at my watch. It was 9-10 pm. "Drive fast now," I asked Kalam and looking backward I told the escorts in the rear seat, "very well done." They smiled and said, "Insha Allah, we will win, sir."

We reached Halishahar area at 9-30. "Now switch off the lights and drive slow," I signalled.

At Halishahar the JCOs and the NCOs were all awaiting my arrival. There were three kotes and all very well under our control. All the Bengali troops had gathered in front of respective kotes to be issued with arms and ammunition. Only a month back we had received a huge quantity of Chinese arms and ammunition to replace ·303 rifles. This created a surplus stock for us and was of great help at a later stage.

My office was kept open. There was a retiring room adjacent to it. The curtains were pulled down and four

soldiers with arms were put in the retiring room. The drama was about to begin.

The task at Halishahar was of vital importance. There were about 300 West Pakistani EPR soldiers, mostly senior JCOs and NCOs. We had to arrest them maintaining maximum silence and secrecy. Moreover, the area surrounding my HQ was thickly populated with non-Bengalis and we had confirmed reports that a large number of commandos were residing with them. These commandos as well as a large number of non-Bengali civilians were fully armed. Thus any noise at the HQ would create suspicion and could lead to a fiasco.

With the kotes under our firm control we were in an advantageous position. The only danger was that anyone could leak out the secrecy and that could bring retaliation from the army at Chittagong cantonment or from the troops concentrated at the naval HQ.

We cordoned the entire area so that no West Pakistani could escape. Thereafter, we set out to arrest all of them in the shortest possible time.

During the second week of March, many Bengali JCOs and NCOs had been sent to the borders and the West Pakistanis had been transferred to EPR HQ in Chittagong. Lt Col Abdul Aziz Sheikh, at that time commander of EPR in Chittagong, did this on instructions from Dacca, obviously to consolidate their own position. These movements troubled my mind initially but as the operation started such changes came as

a blessing in disguise. I got the maximum catch at one place.

To keep the Bengalis as kote guards, I had taken recourse to trickery. During daytime I used to check only the Bengali troops for improper haircut, dresses, saluting and so on. As punishment or corrective action, I used to give them extra guard duties in the kotes, mostly at night.

Thus, I eliminated almost with complete success the possibility of any West Pakistani being present on guard duties. This action paid me great dividends.

It was now around 10 pm. I loitered in the verandah of my office. I was hungry and tension increased my thirst. I asked for a glass of water and then for a second glass.. The troops had been supplied with weapon and ammunition. Two platoons had already moved to a temporary defence position towards the naval HQ to prevent any sudden attack from that direction. I waited for Subedar Major Itbar, the seniormost West Pakistani JCO.

Unsuspecting, the Subedar Major entered my office room. I asked him to take the chair and said, "Subedar Major Saheb ? You have been sleeping but do you know what is happening in the city ?"

"No, sir !" he replied with absolute simplicity. Rightly he did not know anything. He had known that the troops were getting armed but he thought it was part of a preparation for some internal security duties for which I was the overall commander. And to maintain absolute

secrecy, the lowest level in the military echelon that was taken into confidence about 'operation genocide' was that of brigadier rank and at some places up to the rank of Lt colonel. This overdoing of secrecy went in our favour to a great extent.

The Subedar Major rubbed his eyes and from the retiring room out came four Bengali soldiers with bayonets fixed on their rifles. His eyes became wide with fear and before he could utter a word a bayonet was close to his throat.

"Subedar Major Saheb, you are under arrest. If you try to shout or escape, you will be killed," I told him firmly.

He was tied with a rope and taken to the retiring room. In similar fashion we arrested all the West Pakistani JCOs maintaining absolute secrecy. We had to, else we would have been the victims. It was purely a question of survival of the fittest—a question of hitting the enemy before being hit.

Soon afterwards Subedar Mobin, another non-Bengali JCO in charge of EPR signal company, was called to my office. By then the West Pakistani EPR troops had sensed something wrong but were helpless since the area was cordoned and they had no arms.

This Subedar entered my office. I could see he was panicky. As ill luck would have it, in came a telephone call from Major Iqbal. I picked up the telephone.

"Hello Rafiq, what are you doing there at this hour of the night ?" he asked me.

"I just came to see if the guards are alert."

"I see," he replied, paused for a moment, and then abruptly asked, "Where is Subedar Mobin?"

"He might be sleeping in his room. Do you want to talk to him?"

"Yes, please get him to the telephone."

"I am sending a runner to get him here. He will ring you back," I replied calmly and continued conversation in an effort to remove any suspicion from his mind.

"I visited all the troops on duty at different places. Everything seemed to be all right."

To my utter surprise he asked me abruptly, "But there is no reply from Capt Hayat's telephone?"

"Oh well, the telephone is out of order. I just visited him. He offered me a very good tea." To this Major Iqbal said, "Yar, kabhi hamko bhi le chalo chaye piney ke liye (take me at times for such tea)."

"I will take you tomorrow," I replied. During this conversation, Subedar Mobin was tied by the four sepoys. No one outside knew who were entering my office, what was happening and where they were being taken away.

I asked for a bayonet and bringing it close to Subedar Mobin's throat I said, "You have worked under me for quite some time and you know my nature. You will now talk to Major Iqbal and give those replies which I dictate. If you do not follow my instructions I will kill you. Do you understand?"

He nodded shivering. I dialled Major Iqbal's telephone number and brought the receiver close to Subedar Mobin's ears. I bent my head so that I could also hear the questions that were asked.

"Hello sir, Subedar Mobin speaking."

"Mobin Saheb, anybody with you?" Major Iqbal asked. I put my hand on the transmitting end to give my dictation, "You say there is no one." Subedar Mobin complied with.

"But Capt Rafiq was there. Where has he gone?" Major Iqbal inquired.

Again I dictated and he replied, "Capt Rafiq has just gone out with Subedar Major Itbar to check the guards."

"Is there any garbarh (trouble)?"

"No sir, sab kuch thik thak hai (everything is OK)," Subedar Mobin replied very obediently.

"That is good. You stay with the telephone for my instructions. You are the duty officer for the night. Remain very vigilant."

"OK, sir," was the dull reply from Subedar Mobin. I was relieved of a great anxiety. Subedar Mobin was kept there along with a Bengali JCO so that nothing could leak out over the telephone.

Around 10-45 pm Subedar Zainal, the seniormost Bengali JCO, gave me an OK report. We had by then arrested all the West Pakistani troops of EPR in Chittagong. All border posts had acknowledged the receipt of my coded message and acted upon it. They had moved

out to join me in the city. Isolated platoons in the city had been informed and they moved to their respective battle locations. Only the platoon at the airport could not be contacted. This was nerve-wrecking for me. This platoon was supposed to prevent the airport facility being used and protect that area for an ultimate build-up of troops to enable us to attack and take over the entire complex including the airport, the seaport and the naval HQ. The telephone exchange at the airport normally remained open up to 8 every night. To keep in constant touch with the troops, I had given secret instruction to the exchange operator to keep that line operating twentyfour hours. But just after dusk on March 25 troops from naval HQ stealthily moved to the airport and arrested the entire platoon.

That was a great loss for me.

Two platoons were moved to take up defence against any enemy troop movement along the coastal embankment. One company was sent to the Railway Hill to take up defence. About 100 men were sent in batches of two to three to occupy vantage points along Agrabad Road and other important areas preparatory to the street battle. The rest of the troops were kept at Halishahar as reserve to reinforce any threatened area. Troops at Ramgarh were sent a message to deploy a company in defence near Shubapur bridge on the Feni river after demolishing the bridge. The rest of the troops at Ramgarh were to move to the city along the main highway.

Before leaving Halishahar I gave instructions to keep the prisoners in a building with strong guards and "to fight to the last."

By 11-45 pm I was in my tactical HQ on the Railway Hill. I waited for the troops from the border areas to join me so that I could attack the naval HQ, the port areas and the airport. The cantonment could be captured by the Bengali troops of the East Bengal Regimental Centre under Colonel Chowdhury and the troops of 8 East Bengal Regiment stationed at Sholashahar under Major Ziaur Rahman. The total strength of Bengali soldiers at those two places were about 3000 as against hardly 400 West Pakistani soldiers.

At about 11-30 pm that night troops of 20 Baluch Regiment moved out of their barracks and suddenly attacked their Bengali comrades in the EBRC. First, they captured the kote and killed the kote guards. All other troops were at that time sleeping. Having captured the kote, troops of 20 Baluch went into a wild frenzy of killing. On that night they killed more than one thousand Bengali soldiers. Then they moved to the family quarters of the troops and indiscriminately killed anyone within the range of their weapons. Women and children were simply bayonetted to death.

Those Bengali soldiers who managed to escape this butchery ran away in different directions. Some of them reached my HQ to narrate their harrowing tales. Others moved to 8 East Bengal Regiment stationed at Sholashahar. This Regiment had all Bengali soldiers in its strength and most of its officers were Bengalis.

The escapees from the cantonment fervently appealed to 8 East Bengal Regiment to attack the cantonment and save the remaining Bengali soldiers from butchery. One officer who managed to escape from the cantonment narrated to me in complete despair: "From 11-30 pm that night till the morning of March 26, 20 Baluch haunted every ground within the cantonment to kill any Bengali. Soon after the attack a few of our soldiers ran to 8 East Bengal Regiment requesting for help." His eyes became moist as he continued in a choked voice, "If only they had moved to the nearby hills which are very dominating areas and fired a few shots the troops of 20 Baluch would have gone into defence. This would have enabled the Bengali soldiers to escape."

On the Railway Hill, the platoons were quickly organised for defence. The mortars were laid and the civilians were asked to vacate the area and move to safer places. It was about 11-45 pm. Just across my tactical HQ on that hill was the naval communication centre and some movement of the enemy was visible from my position.

At that time a vehicle belonging to the navy slowly passed by, moving to the direction of Chittagong port. My mortar JCO, Subedar Aizuddin, came running from his position. "Sir, there are some naval troops in this. Should we not destroy it?" "No, not now. This is probably making a reconnaissance for the main body. We will hit the main body."

But the main body of troops did not come. In another 10 minutes the same vehicle moved back to the canton-

ment. I came to know much later that the vehicle was carrying Major Ziaur Rahman. He was deputed to get arms and ammunition unloaded from the ship and shift those to the cantonment. He survived miraculously. My own troops in the Railway Hill and those occupying vantage points along the road controlled their fire. But it was another Bengali officer of 8 East Bengal Regiment, Capt Khaliquzzaman Chowdhury, who rushed in a seperate vehicle and stopped Major Zia at Agrabad area. "If you go there for ammunition duty you are likely to end up in arrest," he cautioned him.

He changed his mind from going to the port, took the decision to revolt and moved back to his HQ at Sholashahar. The officers and troops of 8 East Bengal Regiment had by then learnt of what was going on inside the cantonment. Some of them had also learnt that we had revolted and that we had the whole city and the EPR HQ under firm control and that I had sent them a request through Dr Zafar and Mr Kaiser to join us in the ensuing battle.

An officer of 8 East Bengal Regiment later confessed: "There were differences of opinion. Some of the younger officers of the Regiment wanted to go to the rescue of EBRC troops and later join in the city battles. Others argued that it was more important to get the troops properly organised before going into battle. Finally it was decided that the entire regiment would be taken to a safe place for purposes of reorganisation. Accordingly, we left Sholashahar and started moving towards Patiya on that very night."

I remained ignorant of this move till Dr Zafar, whom I had sent to contact 8 East Bengal Regiment and EBRC, returned.

"Could you contact them?" I asked Dr Zafar impatiently.

"Your message has been delivered to 8 East Bengal Regiment. But they are moving out of the city. The EBRC troops could not be contacted."

"Please go and stop them. Everything is now under control and together we can capture the rest of the places. Tonight is the vital night."

That was the most vital night for everyone. In Dacca, all the West Pakistani troops had been ordered compulsory rest up to the evening of March 25. Loading of essential stores was completed the previous night. At 5 pm on March 25, the battalion commanders were given final orders for "Operation Genocide." Soon after dusk hectic movements started within Dacca cantonment. Troops in battle dress lined up in front of their respective unit kotes to be issued with arms and ammunition. Some special detachments were issued with jerricans of petrol. In the name of Islam and Pakistan, they were allured with offers of looted booty and quicker promotions on the basis of the rate of their killing and destruction. Imbued with that spirit, troops started leaving their barracks by 8-30 pm on the night of March 25. By 9-30 pm firing started near the airport. People had already started setting up barricades everywhere in Dacca.

Further north in Rangpur area, 23 Field Regiment (artillery) had by then moved out of Saidpur, their peace location, and camped near Rangpur station.

It was about 10-30 pm when the 3rd East Bengal Regiment under a West Pakistani commanding officer passed through Rangpur en route to Bogra clearing the road blocks.

Capt Nawajesh watched all those movements and could realise that something serious was in the offing. At that time he received a faint wireless message transmitted from my HQ after I had consolidated my position in Chittagong. Decoded, the message read: "We have started. You too must start."

Capt Nawajesh made up his mind. With the Bengali troops of EPR he moved out of Rangpur town and took up defence across Teesta Bridge. Hardly had he left the town when the West Pakistani troops started firing and killing. A curfew was imposed immediately.

The population in the tiny district HQ at Kushtia had *retired on that night* as usual. But in the cantonment at Jessore there was an unusual activity and all the troops were tense. 1st East Bengal Regiment had been moved out of Jessore cantonment prior to March 25 and this 'all Bengali' regiment was tactically camped at Chougacha, only a few miles away. The presence of any organised battalion of Bengali troops within the cantonment area was considered by the West Pakistani senior officers as a security risk and a possible hazard in the execution of an unnatural military operation. Just after dusk

on March 25 a company of 27 Baluch Regiment—a mechanised and mobile unit—was despatched and by 10-30 pm, Delta Company of 27 Baluch Regiment was in front of the police station at Kushtia. After disarming all the policemen the company moved out to capture other vital areas and key points in the city. A curfew was imposed immediately without announcement.

In Comilla cantonment things were not different. 4 East Bengal Regiment was ordered by commander of 53 Brigade, Brigadier Iqbal Shafi, to move to Brahmanbaria and Shamshernagar to check what the Brigadier called 'Indian infiltration.'

By 11 am on March 25 part of this regiment was in Brahmanbaria and the rest at Shamshernagar and realised that the so-called Indian infiltration was a bogey. But Brigadier Iqbal Shafi had achieved his aim. Without any fear of organised resistance, his West Pakistani units rounded up all Bengali army personnel, including their families. By 10-30 pm West Pakistani troops moved out of the cantonment for Comilla city and attacked the police HQ with infantry and artillery. A curfew was imposed there too.

A sick policeman under treatment at the police hospital moved out to the verandah on hearing unusual explosions. But before he could realise what was happening he received a burst from a machine-gun. In another few minutes artillery fire was lifted and the West Pakistani soldiers reached the police lines. Finding the sick policeman groaning and still alive, two soldiers

charged him with bayonets and put an end to his useless struggle with death.

At Kaptai, north of Chittagong, there was no army unit. For a long time it had been a quiet tourist resort. Towards the end of January 1971 a new wing of EPR established its HQ at Kaptai in order to prevent the tribal people from burning down the forests in the adjoining areas. Capt Haroon was a junior officer in that wing of EPR and he was the only Bengali officer at Kaptai. Since the beginning of March he had been visiting me just to keep in touch and he attended the conference that I had in the university area on March 17. At about 10 pm on March 25 the Bengali signal operator rushed to him with my message. Haroon knew what the message meant. Swiftly he, along with his trusted Bengali JCOs, took over the armoury, arrested all the West Pakistanis and started moving with all his men towards Chittagong to join me in the battle.

The streets in Dacca were deserted by 10 pm in anticipation of a curfew. Heavy troop movements along the main city roads heightened tension and the initial sound of firing forced the people to believe that a severe type of martial law was in the offing. But by 11-30 pm when the sounds of guns, tanks and rifle fire came from all sides, the people were thrown into absolute confusion. An unknown fear gripped the whole population.

A large contingent of foreign journalists staying in Hotel Intercontinental in the heart of the city knew

that Yahya Khan had slipped out of the President's House and that Mr Bhutto staying at the Intercontinental was also preparing to leave for West Pakistan. When the firing started all around most of them thought that the curfew was being violated as it had been during the 1969 movement. But a curfew was not even announced. Some of the journalists telephoned Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to know what was happening.

By 12-30 that night the telephones went dead and the whole city was aflame with fire.

31 Field Regiment artillery was tactically deployed in the Second Capital area. This unit had been in East Pakistan for quite some time. Since the hijacking of an Indian aircraft in January, Yahya's government had raised the bogey of an Indian army build-up along the border and conveniently kept pushing out most of the Bengali troops to the borders for deployment. But like all other non-Bengali Army units, 31 Field also remained stationed at its peace location. This unit did not even send an officer to carry out reconnaissance of likely areas for deploying artillery guns, selection of observation posts or the selection of likely targets. These were all military requirements which the Pakistan Army had been fulfilling three to four times every year along the West Pakistan borders.

However, from the last week of February this unit, like other army units, was collecting city maps of Dacca which were specially prepared to suit the artillery's re-

quirement. A top-secret target list was prepared at Eastern Command HQ. The list started with EPR HQ at Peelkhana, Rajarbagh police lines, Dacca University students' halls and the Hindu populated areas in the old city. By 1 o'clock in the morning of March 26 the first artillery shells were landing on and around the main targets.

The bursting of artillery shells shook the whole city. Bullets were flying in all directions. People took shelter under their beds. Children started crying in fear, but those cries were lost in the louder rattling of weapons. Older people started offering prayers and reciting from the Holy Quran. But it seemed God Himself was benumbed and became a silent spectator for some time at least.

By 1-30 am on March 26, one tank, one armoured personnel carrier (APC) and a truck-load of troops moved towards Dhanmondi residential area. Soon they were in front of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's house. For a short period every soldier was firing at that single house. A bewildered Sheikh Mujib shouted, "You can arrest me; but stop this firing." The troops were happy that they got the man they wanted. And the leader of a nation who had asked his people only a fortnight back 'to fight Yahya's army with all they have' ironically met the fate of a prisoner and was moved to a prison more than a thousand miles away from his people and his land.

Meanwhile, as the artillery continued shelling different parts of the city, truck-loads of troops were moving to-

wards Peelkhana, Rajarbagh police lines and the University campus. Near Hotel Intercontinental a defiant group of 10 to 15 men raised their clenched fists and shouted 'Joi Bangla". The army did not understand that language but replied with bursts from automatic weapons. A small detachment moved to a side lane and set the office of the daily "The People" on fire. There was almost no resistance anywhere in Dacca except at the EPR HQ at Peelkhana and at the police lines at Rajarbagh. At both these places the Bengali personnel put up stiff resistance. The initial attacking waves of Yahya's army failed to make any headway and suffered heavy casualties. Then tanks were ordered to assist the infantrymen. A fierce battle continued till dawn. By then the Bengali personnel at Peelkhana and Rajarbagh had suffered very heavy casualties and exhausted all their ammunition. And they were surrounded from all directions. Incendiary tank shells and liquid fire from flame-throwers lit up a big bonfire of the police barracks. Many were roasted alive along with their families and children. Few could escape. Pakistan army finally captured these two places. They found very few prisoners. There were some wounded personnel and all other Bengalis had died fighting the army for over six hours.

Troops from a Punjab Regiment (probably 32 Punjab) were given the task of clearing the Dacca University area. During the non-cooperation movement the universities were closed and the students had left for their homes. Mostly the examinees were staying in the halls

and when they woke up on hearing noise they found themselves trapped, surrounded by the army. Under cover of darkness a few managed to escape to the nearby slums and take shelter. Others were hunted out and killed on the spot. A large number of university teachers of repute were killed brutally without any discrimination of age, sex or religion. Soldiers were not told to discriminate. Every Bengali was their enemy. Within the first 24 hours, many professors and departmental heads of the University were slaughtered.

The people in the slums were the worst victims of army actions. No political movement, demonstration or meeting was ever complete without participation by these unambitious, downtrodden people whose fate had never changed in living memory.

Yet, they had to bear the maximum brunt of every movement or upheaval, directly and indirectly. It was not different for Habib who lived in one of these slums with his wife and five children. Habib was a rickshaw puller and had to work hard for 8 to 10 hours a day to earn his living. The month of March was bad since his income had dwindled owing to frequent hartals and curfews. Yet Habib was dreaming of a better future. He had voted for Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's party and thought his fate would change very soon. That dream was shattered when before dawn on March 26 the soldiers surrounded his area and set the hutments on fire. Habib escaped with a bullet wound ; his family was devoured by the engulfing fire like many other victims

in those slums. That was only the beginning of a tragedy that lasted nine cruel months—a man-made tragedy as is evident from the boasting remark of a Pakistani officer to the foreign journalists: "We can kill anyone for anything. We are answerable to none."

That was an honest confession. The radio broadcast at 8 am on March 26 announced that Yahya Khan had reached West Pakistan leaving East Pakistan at the mercy of Tikka Khan. At 8-30 am Bhutto left Hotel Intercontinental under army escort to go to the airport en route to West Pakistan. Tanks and troops were patrolling the empty city streets shooting at anyone in sight. All foreign newsmen staying at Hotel Intercontinental were told to be prepared to leave East Pakistan. "We want you to leave because it would be too bloody and dangerous," a colonel of the army hinted to the newsmen.

By noon, troops moved to old Dacca. This time it was another Punjab regiment (18 Punjab). The leading column moved ahead shooting at anyone trying to escape. Bengalis were lined up and shot. The leading elements were followed by small detachments who carried petrol cans and flame throwers. As they moved forward, the houses behind were ablaze. Amidst painful dying cries of the Bengalis, proud soldiers of the Pakistan Army marched away. They had saved Pakistan. By dusk on March 26 Dacca was almost empty except for the dead left to rot and the army left to guard. At 8-30 pm army vehicles were in front of Hotel Intercontinental to take away the foreign newsmen to the airport. Next morning a PIA Boeing took them all out of East Pakistan.

VIII ARMED RESISTANCE

Chittagong, March 26. Around 2 o'clock in the morning a strange person came to my tactical HQ. He was heavily built and unusually tall to be a Bengali.

"There is a foreign power willing to provide you any assistance you might be needing, " he said.

"What sort of assistance ?" I enquired.

"Military assistance, obviously."

"How can I be sure ?"

"You come with me to Cox's Bazar. You will be lifted away somewhere to contact that country's representatives and you can have a detailed discussion with them."

"Why don't you contact the political leaders instead of me ?"

"They will not understand military requirements," he said.

"But I cannot leave this place now. There is no other officer to conduct the battle."

"You must come," he insisted.

"I am sorry, I cannot. You better contact the political leaders."

He changed his stand. "Why not come to the radio station and speak over the radio ?"

"You must understand that being the only officer I cannot leave this place. At best you can bring a tape

recorder to get my speech taped here to be played over the radio."

The stranger kept on insisting that I should leave that place. I became suspicious. That could well have been a trap by the Pakistanis. Finally having failed to convince me he left with a promise to return with recording instruments. But he never returned. At a later date he was killed for suspicious activities. Before that he had contacted another group of Bengali army personnel and succeeded in misleading them towards Cox's Bazar—away from the main battle locations.

A telephone call came to my HQ to say that the enemy had moved out from the naval base and attacked our defences at Halishahar. This attack was beaten back and the enemy suffered heavy casualties. The Pakistanis did not expect any opposition and were not prepared to face an organised resistance. When their leading column contacted our first defence layer in Halishahar and was fired at they were completely taken aback and ran away.

At that time another telephonic message came to me to say that a big convoy of 80 to 100 vehicles had left Comilla and were moving towards Chittagong. Someone from Comilla telephone exchange had conveyed this message to the operator at Chittagong and immediately the message was conveyed to me.

From Halishahar I moved a company under a JCO to ambush this column. Besides extra-light machine-guns and machine-guns the company carried some 3-inch

mortars and rocket launchers. The JCO in charge of the company asked over telephone before moving out, "Please pray for our success."

"The whole country is praying for you. Fight, bring glory to your motherland," my voice was getting choked with emotion.

Glory they did bring to their motherland. The column of the enemy comprising a regiment of Frontier Forces and a battery of 120-mm mortars was successfully ambushed near Kumira, 14 miles away from Chittagong. This action by a company of EPR took the enemy completely by surprise. All the way from Comilla up to Kumira the enemy faced no opposition except minor road blocks. And when they crossed Shubapur bridge, Brigadier Iqbal Shafi was only too happy. In another few hours he would have been in Chittagong to join his comrades and then combinedly sort out the Bengalis. Suddenly he was faced with the biggest challenge of his life. He was in an ambush with half of his troops caught in the fire.

Reports collected later confirmed the death of about 70 enemy soldiers including the commanding officer of the Frontier Forces Regiment. Many were injured and a number of vehicles were destroyed. Brigadier Iqbal Shafi ran towards the hills for safety. Others followed him in panic dropping their weapons and leaving all their stores in the vehicles. The rear half of the enemy convoy was out of our firing range and they took up defence immediately. The mortar battery

was also deployed. Soon the enemy artillery started pounding our troops who were caught absolutely in the open.

This ambush by the EPR troops at Kumira was the first direct action against the enemy in the history of our liberation war. The impact of Kumira action was so great that Pakistan Army's original plan of a free run in Chittagong was completely foiled. The enemy's only hope was reinforcements from Comilla since in Chittagong city they did not have enough manpower. Soon after the ambush a wireless message was intercepted. Some commander from Chittagong was talking to Colonel Staff HQ 14 Division at Dacca.

"We have suffered casualties. Our troops are held up south of Sitakund. Request send reinforcements by air. Arrangement for evacuation of casualties by air urgently needed."

I also needed more troops, more arms and ammunition. We too had suffered certain casualties at Kumira. My only hope was the EPR troops who were converging towards the city from the borders.

Capt Haroon was hardly five miles away from the city by dawn, March 26. All along the road his troops were chanting full-throated slogans of "Joi Bangla". But then they stopped. Some army personnel were moving towards Kalurghat bridge, leaving the city. Capt Haroon was confused for a while. "Has the city been completely captured by the enemy ?" he wondered. On checking it turned out that these were the troops of

EBRC and 8 East Bengal Regiment. They were all moving towards Patiya. To be sure before entering the city, Haroon moved across Kalurghat bridge and contacted Major Ziaur Rahman. Haroon was persuaded to stay at Kalurghat area and could not join me in the city battle as per previous arrangement.

Subedar Mafiz was EPR company commander at Cox's Bazar. He left Cox's Bazar for Chittagong with two EPR companies to join me. He was also stopped at Kalurghat area and asked to take up defence there. The JCO confessed to me at a later date: "It is not my fault that I could not join you. An officer at Kalurghat stopped me. I insisted that I be allowed to move into the city since that was your instruction. But I was told that there was none in the city."

We had not left the city till then and, in fact, heavy fighting was going on in different areas. But the direction in which the events were moving made my position in the city untenable.

My reinforcements from Cox's Bazar and Kaptai were thus held up across the bridge. Troops from Ramgarh area could not move owing to heavy fighting at Kumira, along the main highway. I was left with no alternative but to continue with the available forces within the city. Our plan for attacking the naval HQ and the port areas fizzled out.

By 9 am helicopters started hovering over the city at a high altitude. People fired with shotguns from their houses. Giant C-130 transport planes were bringing

reinforcements from Dacca. Helplessly we remained stuck up in our defences determined not to allow the enemy to move out of the cantonment or the naval HQ. But from the cantonment side the enemy faced no opposition in moving out since the troops of EBRC had mostly been massacred and 8 Bengal Regiment had left the city. Supported by tanks 20 Baluch Regiment moved out of the cantonment.

The Pakistanis at the naval HQ failed to make any headway. EPR troops were occupying vantage points all along Agrabad road. Even a by-passing manoeuvre was impossible owing to the strong defence near Halishahar. The enemy's linking up operation suffered a set-back.

Around 2-30 pm that day (March 26) Free Bengal Radio Station (Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra) from Chittagong broadcast a message for other countries to come forward and save the Bengalis from the barbarous Pakistan Army. The broadcast also asked the Bengalis everywhere to fight the enemy with whatever they had. The first broadcast made by Mr M. A. Hannan, Secretary, Chittagong District Awami League, went almost unnoticed.

By evening, an entire brigade (originally part of 16 Division at Quetta) was airlifted to Dacca and part of this brigade was sent to Chittagong. Having been reinforced, a column from naval HQ moved towards Agrabad Road. Another column moved towards our HQ at Halishahar.

The battle at Kumira took a critical turn. Brigadier Iqbal Shafi's troops were so demoralised that nothing could induce them to move forward. A helicopter carrying General Mitta Khan flew to Kumira. To provoke those troops Brigadier Mitta told them a blatant lie : "Your officers, men and their families are being killed by the Bengalis, instigated by the Hindus. Unless you move to their rescue they all will be killed. Go and take revenge. Blood for blood. Save Islam and save Pakistan." The venom of revenge was injected. An evil spirit of vengeance possessed the enemy.

Having failed to move along the main road, Brigadier Shafi sent a column through the hills to join 20 Baluch Regiment in the cantonment. Another column moved along the seashore to outflank our troops who had by then organised a hasty defence.

Dusk had set in. There was intermittent firing from both sides. Civilians were fleeing the battle zone. The young men joined our forces and organised supplies of water, food as well as evacuation of battle casualties to the rear for treatment. Most important, they followed the enemy everywhere and provided us with every information. The Pakistanis lacked this popular support.

The movement of an enemy column along the coastline was known and another ambush was laid immediately. In this second ambush, the enemy suffered still heavier casualties. They left their dead and ran wildly. Many of them lost direction of their base and landed up in villages where they were picked up by the infuriated people and beaten to death.

The EPR company had used up much ammunition and even in my HQ at Halishahar there was not much of reserve to cater for. I ordered the company to fall back and take up new defences on the outskirts of the city within close proximity of Halishahar defences. What we needed badly were replenishment of ammunition and reinforcement of troops. It was difficult tc get any of the two. And the EPR troops from Rangamati had got stuck up at a place a little away from the cantonment.

There were only two more EPR companies in Ramgarh area and they could not move along the highway. There were two alternatives left. Either to capture the ammunition dump in the cantonment or to make a last attempt with a hitherto unknown and unfriendly India. The second course was only a last bite at fate. I decided to adopt the first course and ordered one company from Ramgarh to move across the country and join our element behind the cantonment. The other company was ordered to take a strong defence in the area of Shubapur bridge to prevent any further reinforcement from Comilla by road.

Around 8-30 pm on March 26, we observed some movement in the naval communication base just across my tactical HQ on the Railway Hill. They were all in civil dress and moved to a mosque on the opposite hill. A few more civilians joined them in the mosque. One of my sepoys manning a light machine-gun on the forward slope got up from his trench, and suddenly he was hit by a bullet. It was fired from the mosque

area. Immediately afterwards the enemy opened up its automatic weapons on my position.

And from the deep seas naval guns opened up with heavy artillery fire. Artillery shells were landing everywhere, landing and bursting with deadly splinters whizzing past. Within a few minutes the enemy launched an attack from the Tiger Pass base. That was repulsed. It was followed by another attack. Since both those were frontal attacks, they suffered casualties and could not make any headway. Finally they fell back to their prepared defences and kept firing on my position without any pause.

Similar attacks were launched on Halishahar defence and every time those were beaten back by our soldiers. The battle raged fiercely. The night of March 26-27 seemed to be getting longer. The noise of bursting shells shook the whole city. An endless stream of trace bullets illuminated the night sky with a mysterious glow. The noise of approaching tanks could be heard from the rear of my defences. Having failed to capture our position the enemy had moved its tanks from the cantonment. The possibility of my getting encircled on Railway Hill seemed imminent. We had no anti-tank weapons.

After almost two hours, there was a pause in the artillery shelling. An injured soldier was brought to my command post. He was still in his teens. His cloth, dirty and shabby, was soaked with blood. The bullet was deep in his chest. Gasping for breath, he asked

quietly, "When shall I die ?" His eyes wore the vastness of the whole universe. He spoke no more and was lost for ever like many others, unsung.

But such tragedies in individual human lives mattered little to Yahya Khan. "I shall teach them (Bengalis) a lesson," he spoke over the radio that night. His army had been let loose to that end.

IX ENCIRCLED

Obsessed by his initial success through brutality in Dacca and other places Yahya Khan allowed his army to intensify "Operation Genocide". In their operational areas they killed anything that moved, destroyed anything they wanted. The valiant freedom fighters kept resisting the onslaught of an army superior in manpower as well as firepower. But that resistance could not continue indefinitely since the people were untrained and had only a few obsolete weapons. Organised defences with trained troops were subjected to intense shelling by enemy artillery and repeated attacks had drawn out much of our ammunition.

The Railway Hill defences had to be vacated. We were encircled and were running low in ammunition. For over eight hours naval guns had kept us engaged without respite.

I ordered my troops to withdraw to Kotwali police station area from where they could be moved to an assembly

area behind the cantonment. When every one of them had moved out under fire, I stepped out of my post. A young college student came with me. And neither of us talked.

It was a very foggy morning. A gloom seemed to have enveloped the whole city. A dead city with empty and deserted streets ! A city excavated after hundreds of years from under the earth ! In the far distance the masts of the ships in the port, the cranes, shady villages, all caught my eyes in quick succession. We started descending the hill and as I looked back again a bullet whizzed past. We moved faster.

Near the railway crossing at Kadamtali, naval troops in two trucks were lying in wait in the darkness. Unawares, I kept moving forward.

Will any country come forward to help us ? Do they know what is happening in Bangladesh ? Have they heard our radio broadcast ? These and many other thoughts were flitting across my mind. I was near Kadamtali and about to cross the road when suddenly headlights from two vehicles blinded me momentarily. Troops started jumping out from both the vehicles. I dashed forward in a bid to cross the wall in front. Troops started firing. A bullet hit the stengun in my right hand and the weapon was blown away with a severe jerk. I jumped over the wall and with a heavy thud fell on the ground on the other side. Faster and faster I moved—jumping, crawling, running. The naval troops kept firing in wild anger having missed the prey.

I felt a terrible pain in my left thigh. It was bleeding profusely and a long strip of the trouser was torn up to my knee. Something had cut a deep edge in my flesh when I fell from the wall.

On reaching Kotwali police station I found that all my men had assembled there. The 3-inch mortars became a burden since there was no ammunition for these. A few vehicles were to be left behind. There was no petrol. I rang up Mr Siddiqi to send someone with transport to carry the mortars and ordered the troops to move to the assembly area from where we hoped to attack the cantonment and capture as much arms and ammunition as would be available.

We had to follow a different route. The main road from the cantonment to the city was under the enemy's control. Some troops moved on vehicles, others started off on foot. On the outskirts of the city, a little ahead of Chawk Bazar I found one of my EPR sepoys walking back towards the town.

"Where the hell are you going ?" I shouted.

"To you, sir," he replied gloomily. And without waiting for a further query, he continued, "You sent us for the assembly area behind the cantonment. One officer has taken the troops away to a different direction towards Kalurghat Bridge."

"Who is that officer?" I shouted again.

"I do not know his name."

By that time, members of the Awami League succeeded in contacting Major Zia who had moved out of the city

to reorganise his troops. Many of my EPR troops joined him when they failed to join me in the city.

On the evening of March 27 he was persuaded to come to Madnaghat and speak from the "Free Bengal Radio". In his speech he declared himself as the head of state. This was an inadvertent mistake due to the tension and excitement of those moments. But it created some confusion and misunderstanding and he had to clarify his position by announcing that he was merely speaking on behalf of the leader of the nation. The speech had a significant effect. Everyone came to know that we were fighting the Pakistan Army and the news spread all over.

Anyone could speak anything from the "Free Bengal Radio" at Madnaghat. It was free for all. Thus enough confusion was created. It was aggravated by a complete disruption of communications. We were virtually cut off from each other and from the rest of the world.

More and more troops were being flown to Chittagong from Dacca. Helicopters kept hovering over the city. Street boys aimed and hurled stones at the copters. In almost every house women started cooking whatever they could for the soldiers who were fighting for Bangladesh. Unity was complete and hatred against the Pakistan Army was total. Bangladesh flags were selling out fast and from every pole the defiant flags were fluttering against the blue sky. Part of the city had by then been captured by the enemy and they lowered the Bangla-

desh flags immediately, little realising that the flags were in every Bengali heart.

Meanwhile, the EPR troops near the cantonment awaited my arrival. They were not even a company strength and had insufficient stock of arms and ammunition. I decided to move quickly to Ramgarh and gather as much as I could at the earliest and sent a message to those troops near the cantonment to take up a strong position on which we could build up an attack shortly. I set forth on a complex mission.

That day, very few people noticed the vultures flying high over the Karnaphuli, over the port and further down over the sea. The white sea gulls were gone, no one knew where.

X WITHOUT ANY SUPPLIES

By dawn of March 28 the enemy managed to secure the main road from the cantonment to the naval base at Tiger Pass and established their HQ at the Circuit House in the heart of the city. The column which got stuck up at Kumira succeeded in linking up with the cantonment and our troops had to fall back to the main defence at Halishahar. Halishahar defences served a dual purpose. Firstly, it posed a serious threat to the airport, naval HQs and the port area. Secondly, it provided a firm base to launch an attack on the main complex of the enemy. If the EPR troops were not held up en route the attack

and capture of the port, the airport and the naval HQ could have been a reality and that would have changed the entire course of the battle.

From the direction of the port, the enemy attempted several times during the day to clear Agrabad road and link up with the naval base at Tiger Pass. But against stiff resistance they fell back every time. Any determined effort would have enabled the enemy to capture this road. But a street battle of that nature would have entailed heavy demoralising loss of manpower. Wisely enough they abandoned the idea for that day and awaited the advancing troops from Comilla to reach up to Dewanhat.

In Dampara police lines, the Bengali police personnel put up a very brave resistance. But untrained in the art of warfare, they could not hold on for long. After suffering heavy casualties they abandoned their post when they were about to be overrun.

Next morning, March 29, the enemy bypassed Agrabad road and sent a column in the direction of New Market via Madarbari and Ice Factory Road. New Market itself was not held by us, but I had sent a platoon strength (about 30) of EPR troops to occupy the most dominating ground in that area—the Court Building.

Another enemy column moved out of the naval house opposite the stadium. They moved through a lane near the airways office, killed a few passers-by and headed for the D. C. Hill. Short of the objective, they halted and organised into attack formation. Then with light-

ning speed they rushed for the peak of the hill and captured the entire complex unopposed. Our troops at Court Building kept awaiting the next battle, hoping that some miraculous help would be received by then and that they must resist at all costs till that miracle happened.

That evening someone rang up Chittagong Medical College Hospital for an ambulance to be sent to Zakir Hussain Road. Till then the Medical College was completely under our control and there were some Bengali troops in Prabartak Hill, a dominating ground close by. The doctors, nurses and the students were all working round the clock to treat our battle casualties.

As the ambulance came back, the doctors and nurses rushed out. The door of the ambulance opened and out came jumping a group of enemy soldiers with their weapons at the ready. Swiftly they moved to take up positions in the main hospital building. Soon more enemy troops arrived and by dusk they had all taken up positions.

A dreadful silence fell on the hospital and the adjoining residential areas. Would anyone be able to see the light the next day ?

We were left with two strongholds in the city, one at Halishahar and the other at the Court Hill. There were isolated detachments fighting street battles in different parts of the city. But when the enemy column from Comilla finally succeeded in reaching Dewanhat crossing, our troops at Agrabad area had no alternative but to fall back on the defences at Halishahar.

More than half the city population had fled to the countryside. And a very large number were trekking towards the Indian border. Frustration had gripped everyone. They were wondering whether we could win the war without any supplies or assistance. Such fear was justified as the civilians had seen the helpless condition in which our troops were fighting. We had almost no ammunition. If a weapon became unserviceable the soldier carrying that weapon became useless since he could not be given another weapon. If he was injured we had no means to give him proper first aid or to evacuate him. When he was hungry or thirsty there were no means available to provide him with food or water. And my HQ did not have any wireless communication or any other modern communication system to be in constant touch with troops in different battle locations, to know the latest situation, and to issue necessary battle instructions. Nor did we have enough transport for mobility. Fuel situation was in a hopeless state. We suffered a serious set-back owing to communication and transportation problems. When our position at Kumira was threatened seriously I received that message after three hours through a courier. Within half an hour I despatched some reinforcements. When they reached a place two miles short of Kumira the whole show was over and our troops had all started moving back to Halishahar. By then a total of almost seven hours had elapsed.

Worst of all, I faced the problem of trained manpower. While the enemy was receiving a continuous stream of reinforcements and supplies, I was left to watch help-

lessly a similar stream of civilians leaving the city though on a larger scale.

Not a single bullet, not a single soldier was added to what I started with. And my troops were all tired and exhausted. None had even a wink of sleep since the night of the 25th. When I needed more troops desperately to reinforce the Railway Hill position, the Circuit House area, Medical College, D. C. Hill or even for the battles at Halishahar and Court Building, I could only pull my hair in mute agony.

XI DECISIVE BATTLE FOR CHITTAGONG CITY

March 30. The city was still under curfew. Early in the morning someone frantically kept dialling the emergency ward of Chittagong Medical College Hospital. Peeping through a window, he had witnessed a ghastly scene. A few Pakistani soldiers forced a young boy to climb a tree and lower the flag of Bangladesh. The boy climbed up and lowered the flag reluctantly. Then gently, very gently he started folding the flag with his trembling hands. The soldiers aimed at him and fired. As the boy fell to the ground they laughed and departed. The crimson glow in the distant horizon changed into a blue, hazy blue shade to his vision; and soon turned into thick dark shade, diminishing rapidly into a small black dot. A microscopic dot through which he tried despera-

tely to have a last look at the red sun on a patch of bottle-green in the flag still held in his hands.

No ambulance, no help came to his side. All the ambulances were carrying West Pakistani soldiers. The hospital itself was turned into a military camp. The Bengali doctors, nurses and many patients had left the hospital in a bid to escape from the clutches of the blood-thirsty demons. Those who were too feeble to move from their beds awaited death helplessly.

New Market, the busy fashionable shopping centre, once bustling with activity was quiet on that day. By noon the Pakistanis managed to reach this place through the Ice Factory Road from the port side and fanned out towards Sadarghat, railway station and the stadium. A small detachment moved towards the Court Hill. They rushed back to shelter under a heavy shower of bullets fired by our troops from the Hill.

In Halishahar a battle was raging since 8 am that day. The Pakistanis had opened up with an artillery barrage. All the naval guns were in action. The barrage continued for six hours. Under cover of that barrage they slowly crept towards Halishahar.

The Pakistanis made very little progress against the brave and stiff resistance put up by the EPR soldiers. They called for air support. Two aircraft came within half-an-hour and started engaging our defences from 12-30 pm.

Non-availability of any anti-aircraft weapon or any aircraft of our own gave the attacking aircraft a complete

control of the sky. They ravaged the battle ground systematically. It was a clear and sunny day and the aircraft could pick up each and every trench one by one. Our brave soldiers stuck to their position. A large number of them died in their trenches—fighting. Many were injured but it was impossible to evacuate them under heavy shelling. For others who were still putting up resistance the end seemed quite near. Their ammunition had run out and they now fixed their bayonets preparing for a hand-to-hand close-quarter battle.

About five hundred enemy prisoners, all arrested on the night of March 25-26, were kept imprisoned in a building at Halishahar. By a miraculous coincidence that particular building was mistaken by enemy aircraft and artillery observers to be our HQ and the building received a maximum number of direct hits. It was razed to the ground and almost all the prisoners died at the hands of their own comrades.

By evening the enemy overran Halishahar. A hand-to-hand battle continued for half-an-hour. Numerical superiority decided the final battle in favour of the enemy. Our troops retreated to an alternative position on the Chittagong-Dacca highway. The dead had to be left behind. Also left behind for the enemy were the destroyed buildings, a few empty ammunition boxes and patches of blood on the green grass.

As one of the soldiers from EPR was retreating to the alternative position he stumbled against something. It was the body of one of his comrades, half inside the

trench and half lying on the parapet, resting as if in eternal peace. Gently he laid the dead inside the trench, picked up his comrade's rifle and steel helmet and in the deepening twilight disappeared towards an unknown destination.

Not very far away on the Court Hill position, some of his comrades were perhaps making the routine evening check of weapons or searching for food and may be for a little drinking water. In the far distance vultures were diving down towards the earth and flying back again high up in the sky. To the defenders on the Court Hill, a handful of soldiers mostly from EPR, the vultures carried a dreadful message, more dreadful than the groaning of transport aircraft that were bringing reinforcements. Somehow, these majestic birds of the blue sky always escaped the wrath of nature and men. Only a few months back they were flying over the islands and the coastal areas feasting on millions of dead left behind by a severe cyclone and a tidal bore.

When Halishahar fell, the enemy's full attention was diverted to the Court Hill, our last hold in the city, and our last hope too. A number of attacks were launched from various directions and every time the attacks were repulsed. Tanks were brought in. As the leading tank started climbing up the metalled road it was hit by an anti-tank shell and it went out of action. Other tanks and infantry men following it came to a sudden halt, trying to gasp and re-assess our state of preparedness and strength. But they knew our weaknesses; that we had limited ammunition and that the Court position was

almost cut off. No help or reinforcement could reach the defenders.

On April 2 the enemy launched a well-coordinated dawn attack supported by naval guns, artillery tanks and mortars. A complete battalion took part in the attack against thirty defending soldiers. The first attack by two companies was repulsed. This was followed by more attacks. Then the two reserve companies attacked from another direction. Under cover of enormous fire power they started slowly climbing the hill. The defenders had exhausted their ammunition and the only anti-tank weapon became unserviceable. Two tanks climbed up ahead of the infantry. Miraculously most of our men managed to withdraw. The Court Hill fell and we lost Chittagong city for an indefinite period.

It was 12-30 pm. Thirty defiant EPR soldiers had held that position for more than 3 days under continuous shelling and repeated attacks by a battalion. Even defeat cannot undermine the courage they displayed.

Bangladesh radio operating from Bahaddarhat on the outskirts of the city was silenced by enemy air action in the afternoon of March 30. Millions of minds tuned ardently to the radio suddenly became restive and anxious. To them, it was as though the pulse of the new-born had suddenly stopped beating.

A strong wind had been blowing since the morning of April 3. It turned into a cyclonic storm lashing down everything in its wake. Electricity and water supplies were completely disrupted. All the markets and shopp-

ing centres were closed. The stranded population was on the verge of forced starvation. There was no food, no water, no electricity; nothing of daily essentials was available. Some people sent out their servants in search of food. They were shot by the Pakistanis. Very young children would cry for milk and water and the mothers would force them to silence so that the cry was not heard outside by the soldiers who had started a mopping up operation. And pressing their children close to their bosoms, many mothers shed silent tears. In Bangladesh only blood and tears were flowing in plenty. May be to make this land purer some day.

XII A NEIGHBOUR IS CONTACTED

Ramgarh, a small subdivisional town on the bank of the Feni river, had been a quiet place for many years. Across the river in Indian territory, is another subdivisional town—Sabroom. The people on both sides of the river have been known to each other for long. Away from most of the evils of civilization they were happily settled in their land, leading simple lives. But when the battle started on March 25, its impact was felt even in such a remote bordering town like Ramgarh. As the last days of March were slowly rolling into eternity, Ramgarh was preparing itself to be ravaged.

In the first week of April, I made a hurried trip to Ramgarh in a bid to contact Indian authorities and get some supplies of arms and ammunition. Officials of the

Indian Border Security Force (BSF) met me at Sabroom and immediately made arrangements so that I could meet the seniormost officials at Agartala and, if necessary, at the Indian capital.

The Indian Government was caught unawares and unprepared for a war that we were engaged in. The impact of the war was felt even in India. The Indian people realised very soon that something terrible was happening across their border in East Pakistan. The Indian press and radio soon caught up with the speed and depth of the tragedy that was dragging itself on to the Indian soil. The Indian Government faltered momentarily. "A whole nation so close to us cannot be allowed to be exterminated," Mrs. Gandhi declared. Hundreds of miles away from the Indian capital, the propaganda machinery of the Pakistan Government was blaring out : "Everything is peaceful in East Pakistan."

The world refused to believe it although most of the governments preferred to maintain neutrality. Tragic tales of human suffering in Bangladesh started filtering through the Indian borders to the civilised world. Anguished newsmen from different countries speedily transmitted those tales around the world.

"India cannot remain a silent spectator to what is happening next door," declared the Indian Prime Minister. Her eagerness to assist us in our struggle for freedom and survival added a new dimension to the struggle. But help in what form ? When I arrived in Agartala

early in April, I was told that no one from Bangladesh had till then approached the Indian Government for any help or assistance. The nature and extent of the whole struggle remained a matter of 'guess' to them nor did they have any clear picture of the situation.

In Agartala I had a series of discussion with high Indian officials and, finally, with Mr Sachin Singh, Chief Minister of Tripura. I requested the Chief Minister to arrange some supplies of essential arms and ammunition and gave him a list of my requirements. But such supplies were needed to be sanctioned by the central government and I was asked to await a reply from Delhi.

Meanwhile arrangements were being made for me to fly to Delhi.

Next day, Mr M. R. Siddiqi, Mr Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury and some other politicians of Chittagong arrived in Agartala and we all met the Chief Minister again. Political people were more competent for the type of negotiations that I had undertaken. When political people from our side were available to continue negotiations with the neighbouring country, I decided to move back to the battle front. Before departure, I prepared a comprehensive list of essential military requirements and gave it to Mr M. R. Siddiqi for perusal.

Having gained tactical control over Chittagong city, the Pakistanis started fanning out towards the countryside. One column moved in the direction of Ramgarh via Hathazari—Fatikchari—Narayanhat—Hiakhu. A column each moved to Rangamati, Kaptai and Cox's

Bazar. At that stage, we decided that we must dominate the entire countryside. To achieve that it was imperative to contain the enemy within the city. Through organised guerrilla warfare, a process of attrition would drain the enemy of its strength and energy and then we could deal him a final decisive blow. That it would be a long-drawn tragedy, in which an unknown number of our people would die, was clearly understood. We had no alternative but to prepare for that seemingly endless war and unbelievable human sufferings.

Two EPR platoons sent from Ramgarh as containing force prepared a hasty defence between Bhatiari and Fauzdarhat, about five miles away from the city. Two other platoons were sent as reinforcement towards the cantonment via Fatikchari—Hathazari. Capt Oli and a number of other younger officers were holding a defence with about six companies across Kalurghat bridge. At this stage, perhaps on April 4, we received some supplies of arms and ammunition from India. Some sort of local reorganisation also took place. Bengali armed personnel not needed elsewhere were shifted to more important battle fronts. Two such companies, one under Capt Matin and the other under Lt Ejaz, travelled more than a hundred miles through India to strengthen Chittagong sector. One company with sufficient arms and ammunition was rushed towards Bhatiari as reinforcement. I took the other company and moved again towards Chittagong cantonment via Hiakhu-Fatikchari.

It was a difficult journey. The road was unmetalled and in a very bad condition. The vehicular convoy consisted of jeeps used in the Second World War and half the way we had to keep pushing the jeeps.

The move itself could not be kept secret since it was done during the daytime and thousands of people were fleeing towards India along that route. Although we were all in civilian dress and our arms were kept hidden, yet the very organised pattern of our move towards the lost city of Chittagong brought new hope to the terrified population. For self-satisfaction they would exaggerate the number of freedom fighters moving towards the city and such news travelled fast right up to the enemy camp.

The stream of that fleeing population was continuous and a gloom had possessed them. It seemed as if a deep and painful silence was hanging in the air. Wherever we stopped, people thronged around us. "Can we come back very soon?" they would ask eagerly. "Oh yes, very soon. Only a few weeks, may be." Suddenly they would beam with smile, straighten themselves and raise their clenched fists towards the sky. Someone would raise a thunderous slogan of Joi Bangla. Soon that would echo in a hundred thousand voices ; echo in the hills, in the air and even into the void beyond. Older people, men and women alike, would touch our vehicles, our clothes or anything else with their hands and having done so would softly kiss those hands.

We halted at Narayanhat and by dusk consumed our meal of rice and pulse. A few countryboats were arra-

nged to carry the troops up to Nazirhat. The sky was cloudy and the boats had no cover. Tired and exhausted, we all fell asleep. The rains came and we all got drenched. It was a cold night and we were shivering.

Reaching Nazirhat at dawn, I received the message that our troops near cantonment had fallen back to Hat Hazari. A quick reconnaissance was made for a base from where we could operate. Udalia tea garden, just a few miles away, turned out to be a suitable place and we all moved in that direction. The Bengali Manager of the garden received us cordially and provided all assistance.

It was a small tea garden on hillocks that branched off from Sitakund hill range. Troops were divided into small groups for collecting information, food and for various other jobs. The action group was prepared and kept stand-by to move at short notice. Alternative bases were selected for any eventuality. When the base was finally prepared I moved towards Kalurghat leaving Lt Ejaz in charge of the axis.

Kalurghat defence was manned combinedly by the troops of EBRC, EPR and 8 East Bengal Regiment under the command of Capt Oli Ahmed. There were a total of about six companies. Such a large number of troops were actually required in the vital battle locations. Initially these troops were needed most urgently for the city battles and thereafter in the most important axis along the Chittagong-Dacca highway.

However, Kalurghat battle took place after two weeks owing to some unknown reasons and during this period our troops could not be utilized properly. Although the young officers displayed courage, determination and tenacity, yet the absence of qualified senior officers was badly felt by the troops. True, we did not have many senior officers. But at least one of them, Major Showkat, was kept at Cox's Bazar on the basis of some wrong information till the officer took a decision himself, left Cox's Bazar and joined the troops at Kalurghat.

Our resources on this axis were negligible. Besides obsolete ·303 rifles there were a few light machine-guns and only two mortars of 3 inch calibre. EPR mortar JCO did a magnificent job. With only a few rounds of mortar ammunition he kept the enemy position engaging from several places, firing from here now, then quickly moving away and firing from there again in quick succession. He kept the enemy in a state of utter confusion as to the actual number of mortars being used. This type of actions slowed down enemy advance further and the Kalurghat battle took a final shape on April 11, almost after two weeks.

Meanwhile, I left for Kumira on the main axis, after inspecting Kalurghat defences and assessing the requirements of the troops. En route at Ramgarh, I met Major Zia and discussed with him the situation at Kalurghat and the other places that I visited.

XIII KUSHTIA BATTLES

Kushtia. A curfew imposed by the Pakistani troops was lifted in the morning of March 28 and resistance was immediately organised by the people. On the night of March 28-29 EPR and police personnel along with the civilians attacked troops of 27th Baluch Regiment at Kushtia police station and captured that post.

Major Osman, wing commander of EPR at Chuadanga, had luckily escaped from Kushtia in the afternoon of March 26. At Chuadanga he collected the five EPR companies available to him and started organising resistance. Osman contacted Lt Colonel Jalil, a Bengali commanding officer at 1st East Bengal Regiment, who was at Chaugacha with his battalion. In his message, Osman requested Colonel Jalil to join the resistance group and assume overall command. On March 28, Colonel Jalil was, however, called back to Jessore by the brigade HQ and ordered to concentrate 1st East Bengal Regiment in the cantonment. Osman managed to send another messenger to Colonel Jalil but got no favourable reply.

Bengali soldiers of 1st Field Ambulance in Jessore cantonment had sensed the imminent danger. When 1st East Bengal Regiment returned to Jessore cantonment from Chaugacha, troops from 1st Field Ambulance immediately contacted their friends in 1st East Bengal and persuaded

them not to deposit their weapons in the kote. But the arms and ammunition had already been deposited and the troops were all resting in their barracks. On the night of March 29-30 when the troops of 1st Bengal Regiment were sleeping they were suddenly attacked by West Pakistani troops. Many Bengali soldiers were killed in that treacherous attack. Only a few could escape the butchery and they moved to Chaugacha, later to merge with the troops of Osman.

On March 31, thousands of people thronged the streets of Kushtia shouting Joi Bangla. They were armed with bamboo sticks, farm tools and a few ·303 rifles. The mob swelled up in number and in ferocity. By noon that day, the disorganised, infuriated mob overpowered the Pakistanis and captured two posts. The enemy retreated and tried to get out of Kushtia town in jeeps and trucks. Throughout the night and up to the evening of April 1 the wild chase continued. The fate of Delta Company, 27 Baluch, was sealed for ever. The news that enemy soldiers were trying to escape to Jessore cantonment had spread everywhere and the people put up barricades to stop them. Most of the troops of Delta Company were captured by the afternoon of April 1, and instantaneously killed by the people. By that time Delta Company had killed more than two hundred Bengali civilians besides injuring a large number. The remnants of Delta Company moved out of the radio building in the early hours of April 2 and tried to escape on foot through cross-country since no vehicle could move owing to the barricades made with felled trees,

road-cuts and various other improvised methods. En route, they fired on any civilian in sight; but soon they all became tired, exhausted and ran out of ammunition. They were overpowered by the people and Delta Company, 27 Baluch Regiment, ceased to exist in the official battle list of the Pakistan Army.

Next day, April 3, another infantry company was despatched from Jessore to reinforce Kushtia. This company also met with a similar fate. En route, at Bishakhali village, the company fell into a trap. There was a deep pit in the road covered with bamboos. Two jeeps leading the convoy plunged into it and the convoy came to a sudden halt. Before the enemy could realise what had happened they were surrounded by the Bengalis who had laid the ambush. Half the company was killed on the spot. Others were chased through the fields, overpowered and slain. Jessore garrison became panicky having lost half an infantry battalion in two encounters with untrained civilians. The news that EPR troops and policemen joined by the civilians had started converging towards Jessore cantonment completely unnerved the enemy.

On April 3, Pakistan airforce planes flew over Chuadanga on a bombing mission. For more than two hours there was indiscriminate strafing and bombing in which many innocent civilians were killed and injured.

On April 5, Mr Tajuddin Ahmed, an Awami League leader, visited Jibannagar border where Major Osman met him and requested for adequate supplies of arms

and ammunition and other stores. The discussion was abruptly abandoned when a message was received that the Pakistanis had started advancing towards Jhenidah from Jessore. That evening at 5 pm, two enemy companies launched the first attack on Bishakhali followed by two more attacks which were all unsuccessful. Enemy casualties were high and next day seventy enemy dead were collected from the battlefield.

By April 7, rail communication between Darshana and India and telephone communication with Calcutta were established by the people.

By April 10, the freedom fighters were hardly six miles away from Jessore cantonment. That was a crucial time. They were awaiting requisite supplies of arms and ammunition so that an attack on the beleaguered cantonment of Jessore could be launched. At that time Osman received a message saying: "Heavy reinforcement of enemy on the eastern bank of the Padma. Enemy trying to land either at Goaland or Nagarbari."

XIV ELABORATE PLANNING IN COMILLA

The treacherous attack and killing of almost 1500 Bengali soldiers in the Chittagong cantonment was not an isolated event. A similar attack was made by the Pakistan Army in Jessore cantonment. But in Comilla, the enemy tried to make too elaborate a planning and they failed to a great extent.

Major Khaled Musharraf was posted to 57 Brigade in Dacca as Brigade Major. Towards the middle of February he observed unusually frequent visits of senior army officers from GHQ Rawalpindi to Dacca. Preparations were in full swing to accommodate two units (13 FF and 22 Baluch) coming from West Pakistan and special secrecy was maintained about those two regiments.

On February 18, Khaled made a short trip to Chittagong to find out from his Bengali comrades if they had understood what that "hush-hush" was about. "These are all political problems and politicians' headaches. We as soldiers have nothing to do. You must keep away," he was told flatly by some of his Bengali comrades there.

Towards the middle of March, Khaled received his order of posting to 4 East Bengal Regiment at Comilla and joined his unit on March 22 in the evening. That night he was told about the latest developments by the young Bengali officers of 4 East Bengal Regiment. Their accounts confirmed his earlier suspicion. He was then told by his compatriots that 53 Field Regiment artillery had its guns laid on 4 East Bengal Regiment ; that 3rd Commando Battalion had kept all their long range automatic weapons fixed ; and that trenches were dug encircling 4 East Bengal Regiment.

One company of 4 Bengal was earlier sent out of Comilla cantonment for internal security duties in Brahmanbaria under Major Nawaj, a West Pakistani, and Capt Shafat, a Bengali.

On March 24, Khaled was called by Lt Colonel Khizer Hayat, West Pakistani commanding officer of the regiment, and was ordered to move to Shamshernagar with one company to check what he termed Indian infiltration. Khaled requested that as second-in-command of the regiment he should not be sent out unless at least two companies were moving for operational duties. The commanding officer's plan was ready and he promptly told Khaled, "You will have more than two companies. One company of 33rd Punjab from Sylhet and two companies of EPR have already been sent there and they will all be under your command." Khaled still insisted on two companies from his own regiment and having failed to persuade him the commanding officer took Khaled to the Brigade Commander. Brigadier Iqbal Shafi assured Khaled that he would be given more troops at Shamshernagar.

Finally, Khaled moved out after dusk on March 24 and reached Shamshernagar on March 25 at 11 am. There was no trace of any other army or EPR troops as promised even by the Brigadier and no trace of any infiltration whatsoever. This completely puzzled Khaled and he became all the more suspicious about the motives of his West Pakistani commanding officers. He tried to contact Capt Shafat over the wireless set but was not able to do so until the next afternoon. Shafat could not communicate anything since a West Pakistani officer was all the time standing near the set. Shafat had by then learnt what was happening in Dacca from civilians who had

managed to flee away. At 8 pm on March 26, Shafat found an opportunity and immediately sent a message to Khaled: "Massacre in Dacca. Curfew all over. They are shooting right and left."

This terrible news sapped away all his energies and Khaled lay exhausted for quite some time. His posting from Dacca to Comilla and then his move from Comilla to Shamshernagar—all this emerged in his mind as part of a well-planned conspiracy.

Instructing Shafat to remain prepared and vigilant against any sudden attack by West Pakistani troops, Khaled ordered his company to move to Brahmanbaria and join Shafat. By 10-30 pm on 26th Khaled set off for Brahmanbaria with his company.

Brigadier Iqbal Shafi had by then set off for Chittagong with a regiment of Frontier Force and a mortar battery and met the unexpected ambush by EPR troops at Kumira. Colonel Khizer Hayat was not sitting idle too. Having sent out two companies of Bengal Regiment to Shamshernagar and Brahmanbaria, he himself moved out for Brahmanbaria on the night of March 25. Troops of a Punjab regiment was also then closing in on Brahmanbaria. Khizer Hayat called a conference of all officers at 9 am on March 27 at Brahmanbaria. His plan was to arrest all the Bengali officers in the conference and then deal with other Bengali troops. However, when this secret move of the Punjabi troops became known and their intentions became clear, Shafat did not waste any time. He quickly arrested Colonel Khizer Hayat and other

West Pakistani officers on 27th morning and reorganised his troops. By 10-30 am Khaled arrived at Brahmanbaria with his troops and set off to organise a planned resistance with available soldiers—EPR, police personnel and suitable civilians including Ansars and Mujahids. One such amalgamated company was sent to take up defence near Bhairab. One company each was sent for Narshingdi, Companyganj and Sylhet. Capt Shafat moved with a company to clear Akhaura, Kashba and Gangasagar. Khaled established his HQ first at Madhabpur and thereafter at Teliapara tea garden. Mr Taheruddin Thakur, an Awami League leader, left for Agartala to find out what assistance could be obtained from the Indian authorities for the troops.

On April 1, Khaled received a message that Major Safiullah of 2nd Bengal Regiment at Joydevpur had reached Kishoreganj en route to Dacca. Khaled immediately sent an officer to contact Safiullah so that before moving towards Dacca both could jointly discuss and take decision about the future course of action. On the night of April 2-3, Safiullah arrived at Brahmanbaria and after discussions abandoned the idea of proceeding towards Dacca. They decided to hold as much territory as possible against likely enemy attacks. On April 3, they established contact with the Indian authorities and requested for supplies of arms, ammunition and certain essential stores.

A platoon strength of Bengali troops was deployed at Jangalia WAPDA (Water and Power Development Authority) grid station, a few miles from Comilla on

Comilla-Laksham Road, before March 25. The platoon remained isolated till April 3, when a young officer with another platoon was sent to command the area. They took up defence in Lalmai Hills. A convoy of the enemy moving towards Laksham was ambushed by these platoons at Bagmara near Laksham. The Pakistanis suffered heavy casualties—more than fifty dead—and was forced to withdraw to Comilla cantonment. A large number of light machine-guns, machine-guns and Chinese weapons were captured.

Meanwhile, Shafat cleared all the border outposts in his area. On April 7, two enemy companies moved up to Companyganj on transport and then moved through cross-country. In brief encounters, the enemy succeeded in capturing Kashba and Gangasagar but failed to capture Akhaura. Two of our companies, sent as reinforcements, recaptured Kashba and Gangasagar by April 15. But a serious threat was developing on the bank of the Meghna river near Bhairab, which was being defended by Safiullah and his troops. Both Safiullah and Khaled had very limited number of trained troops ; perforce they were dispersed over a large area and it became doubtful if they could come to each other's help at all without seriously jeopardizing their own defences.

XV FROM MYMENSINGH TO BHAIRAB

2nd East Bengal Regiment was stationed at Joydevpur, on Dacca-Mymensingh road. Since the beginning of March, the regiment was kept dispersed on orders from 57 Brigade HQ. One company was sent to Tangail. Another company under Major Safiullah moved to Mymensingh with orders to move to Jamalpur borders—all on the pretext that an Indian invasion was expected at any time. The rest of the battalion remained at Joydevpur with orders to remain stand-by to move to Mymensingh.

In the first week of March, Lt General Shahibzada Yaqub, Corps Commander and Martial Law Administrator, visited this regiment before his final departure to West Pakistan and hinted that "the country has dark days ahead". He said, "I am sure you will fight up to the expectation of your land and keep up the tradition."

Since then the regiment went through a number of ordeals. On March 19, at the peak of the non-cooperation movement and of political turmoil, Brigadier Arbab, 57 Brigade commander, moved to Joydevpur with a strong contingent of troops. A rumour spread that the West Pakistani Brigadier had come to disarm 2nd East Bengal Regiment. Immediately barricades were set up by the civilians so that the Brigadier could not take away arms and ammunition of 2nd Bengal Regiment. Troops were sent to clear the barricades and a clash

ensued resulting in the death of some civilians and injuries to many others. Finally, the Brigadier managed to go back to Dacca but without the arms of 2nd Bengal. On March 23, the Bengali commanding officer of the regiment went to Brigade HQ in Dacca and was detained there. Around 11-30 pm on March 25, Lt General Tikka Khan, the new Governor and Martial Law Administrator, personally rang up 2nd Bengal HQ and ordered a company to be moved to Ghazipur ordnance factory. Soon afterwards the previous battalion commander rang up the battalion from Dacca and wanted to know what was happening in Joydevpur.

Joydevpur was, however, quiet and the Bengali officers were still in the dark as to what was happening in Dacca or elsewhere. But trouble was brewing in Mymensingh. The non-Bengali assistant wing commander of 2 Wing, EPR, had received some secret instructions from Dacca and, accordingly, divided the EPR personnel of that wing into Bengali and non-Bengali groups. On March 27 he asked the Bengali troops to take rest and put the non-Bengali personnel on duty. Suddenly at night non-Bengali EPR troops opened fire on their Bengali comrades from building tops and other pre-selected dominating positions. The Bengalis quickly took up position and returned the fire. Fighting continued up to 2 pm on March 28, and Mymensingh was cleared of all non-Bengali troops, most of them having been killed. In that battle, Major Nurul Islam played a vital role.

In the morning of March 27, the regiment moved away from Joydevpur to Mymensingh and Safiullah asked

the troops at different places to join him at Mymensingh. By the evening of 28th they reached Mymensingh. But Safiullah was still undecided as to what he should be doing. A wireless intercept that evening helped him in taking a decision. The message sent by GOC 14 Division to Col Staff, HQ Eastern Command, went like this : "We have captured HQ of 8 Bengal Regiment. Proceeding towards radio station. Stiff resistance and heavy casualties elsewhere." (Kumira, Railway Hill, Halishahar ?)

Safiullah got a hint of what was happening and that organised resistance had developed at places. Immediately he started consolidating all EPR, Police, Ansar and Mujahid personnel. Two EPR companies were sent towards Mirpur and Mohammadpur, one EPR company was sent along Tongi-Joydevpur road and a detachment (of EPR, police and irregulars) was sent to defend Kaoran bridge near Ghafargaon. He kept the entire 2nd Bengal Regiment with himself and wanted to move to the eastern side of Dacca (Bashabo area) via Kishoreganj-Narshingdi.

Meanwhile a Pakistani battalion moved from Dacca towards Mymensingh. On March 30, this battalion was ambushed by the EPR company. It was an unexpected event for the newly arrived troops from West Pakistan and they were caught by surprise. At least two enemy platoons were wiped out in the brief battle and the enemy pulled back.

Another enemy column of two infantry battalions and an artillery unit moved towards Bhairab. A company

of 2nd Bengal had laid an ambush for this column near Narshingdi and on April 2 a battalion was trapped in the ambush. Enemy casualties were high—estimated to be one hundred. But it was too big a target to be contained by only one company. The enemy pulled back and soon his artillery started pounding our troops forcing them to withdraw and take up defence at Rampur near Bhairab. It was at this stage that Safiullah established contact with Khaled and reorganised his troops. Two regular infantry companies were deployed at Bhairab facing Narshingdi. One company was despatched towards Sylhet and the fourth company kept in reserve at Sarail. Irregulars like Ansars and Mujahids were integrated with all these regular companies as reinforcements.

On April 7, the Pakistanis pulled out of Sylhet and concentrated at Salutikar airfield. But the main battle was developing along the Meghna river near Bhairab bridge where the enemy concentrated a full infantry brigade. Enemy artillery was deployed at Mithakanda. Aircraft were flying over our defences on reconnaissance mission every day. Finally on April 15, it started in a big way.

From 5-30 in the morning, six F-86 Sabre Jets started strafing 2nd East Bengal defences. Artillery also opened up simultaneously. Our troops could not move out of their trenches to an alternative position and they had no weapon to encounter enemy artillery, let alone enemy aircraft. Under cover of shelling and strafing two commando companies were air-dropped at Talsha-

har, behind our defences. Threat from the rear became critical. At this stage the reserve company from Sarail was moved forward. But then it was too late. Reinforcement by a company was too insignificant keeping in view the enemy strength and his resources. The battle was drawing to an end decidedly in favour of the enemy. Our casualties mounted owing to continuous strafing and shelling. A fear gripped the soldiers when enemy started advancing from the rear. Troops started pulling out in the thick of that battle and, in the process, they all got scattered.

From Bhairab the enemy continued his advance along the railway line towards Brahmanbaria and Akhaura. By the end of April, Brahmanbaria fell to the enemy and was followed by the fall of Akhaura without much of resistance.

At Salutikar airfield, almost a battalion of the enemy was trapped and they had no escape route open. Unfortunately, not enough trained soldiers could be concentrated around Salutikar to attack the beseiged airfield. Reinforcements were being airlifted from Dacca raising the enemy strength at Salutikar to almost two battalions. On April 19 Pakistani aircraft strafed our defences around Salutikar up to 12-30 pm. In the evening the enemy tried to fan out but it was a futile attempt since the freedom fighters had earlier taken up well dug-in position. The enemy suffered heavy casualties. More attempts were made and every time casualties mounted on the enemy side. But that was temporary. Supported by conti-

nuous strafing and bombing and reinforcements it was only a matter of time for the enemy to fan out from Salutikar.

XVI BATTLE GAINS MOMENTUM

Since the fall of Chittagong city on April 4, the Pakistanis were slowly creeping towards Kalurghat bridge and by April 10 had consolidated their position near the bridge. The enemy was in the offensive and prolonged stay in defence had robbed our troops of any initiative whatsoever. Major Showkat arrived from Cox's Bazar and tried to retrieve the prospects. But it was too late.

At 8 am on April 11, enemy artillery and naval guns started shelling Kalurghat defences intensely. Capt Haroon and Lt Shamsher were with the forward troops on the western side of the bridge (city side). The main defences were on the eastern side.

As the intensity of the shelling increased, the enemy started moving towards the bridge in battle formation. From his trench, Haroon observed unusual movement and asked Shamsher, "Give me your binocular. Let me see the main concentration of the enemy." Hardly had he finished talking to Shamsher when Haroon felt a sudden scratch in his abdomen. And then he was twitching with pain. He was hit by a full burst from a light machine-gun. Two students helped Haroon up to

the bridge and then he ran across the bridge and got to the other end, breathless and almost unconscious. He was evacuated in a microbus to Patiya. Immediately afterwards Shamsher was hit by a bullet in the knee and could not move at all. The battle was on and Shamsher became a prisoner of war. The loss of two officers completely demoralised our troops and they started pulling out from their defences. By evening that day Kalurghat defence crumbled and our troops moved towards Ramgarh through the Hill Tracts.

En route at Mahalchari they were caught in a battle with a commando company of the Pakistan Army reinforced by the Mizo dissidents who had been sheltered and trained by the Pakistan Government for insurgent operations against India.

One of our companies which had established a base at Udalia tea garden had to abandon the area under heavy pressure. On Chittagong-Dacca highway a fierce battle was going on at Kumira where our troops had taken up defence to stop enemy advance. Continuous artillery shelling with the help of aerial observation had inflicted substantial losses on our side. To avoid any further casualties, troops were withdrawn to Sitakund. Only a few troops were left at Kumira to delay the enemy till Sitakund defences were prepared. By April 16, the enemy contacted our defences at Sitakund and launched a number of attacks supported by artillery and naval guns. Enemy casualties were high. Various sources confirmed that the military and civil hospitals in Chittagong, Dacca and Jessore could not cope up with the

number of casualties that were pouring in. Initially some of the bodies of Pakistani officers and JCOs were flown to West Pakistan for burial but that practice was stopped very soon when it attained an unmanageable proportion and created adverse reaction amongst fellow troops and civilians in West Pakistan. Moreover, the Pakistan Government wanted to hide everything about the happenings in Bangladesh.

As the battle continued spreading to every corner of Bangladesh, in a quiet mango grove near Badyanathtala outpost in Kushtia district (later known as Mujibnagar) a ceremony took place on April 17 to inaugurate the new Bangladesh Government. A detachment of EPR presented a guard of honour to the Government in the presence of a large team of foreign correspondents, radio and television crew and neutral observers.

On April 18, the enemy succeeded in breaking through the Sitakund defence and our troops had to fall back to Mirsharai, leaving a few weak delaying positions in between. We knew that at Mirsharai we could hold on for some time and then fall back to some other position, fight again and fall back. This sad process would continue—no one knew for how long. Troops were by then losing confidence in their ability to hold on to any ground indefinitely. The enemy was dictating the outcome of every battle by sheer weight of trained manpower and tremendous firepower. What we needed were some good weapons in those difficult days. We were fighting a conventional war and unless the supply situation improved chances of our success were very bleak. Un-

fortunately our higher HQ, hundreds of miles away from battlefield noises, remained ignorant of the actual requirements in the field and adhered to the teachings of the book blindly. On the one hand, our HQ asked us to "stick to the defences" and, on the other, to our demand for better weapons and essential supplies of military hardware they had that elusive answer : "It is a guerrilla warfare, heavier weapons are not essential." A correct and straight answer regarding higher HQ's inability to meet our requirements would have removed much of the misunderstanding. Unfortunately, that did not happen. Throughout the nine months of war this attitude of the higher HQ kept drawing us far apart from each other. Most embarrassing was the situation for us, commanders in the field, who had to face the troops and answer their questions.

It was sad and heart-breaking when our soldiers, injured by enemy artillery, would ask why our artillery was not engaging the "Kaffirs" (sinners) and we would merely turn our face. There was nothing to offer as a reply. On assurances from the higher HQ, I had earlier promised them that very soon we would be supplied with better weapons. With the passage of time all assurances turned out to be mostly hollow. And yet I had to force my men to hold on to their defences for as long as possible. There was no alternative. At times it seemed as though we were using our troops as guineapigs. No soldier likes to die helplessly. He prefers to fight it out. But the scope to fight was getting more and more limited.

On April 20, the enemy launched a full-fledged attack on Mirsharai with two battalions. The artillery had been softening up our defences for almost 24 hours prior to the final attack.

Owing to the non-availability of digging tools and other defence material, our troops could not prepare any strong bunkers. On a number of occasions I witnessed troops using bayonets to dig the earth. And there was no material to provide overhead protection. Whatever was done in the form of bunkers and trenches collapsed when artillery fire rained and the troops were caught without any overhead protection. As expected, the enemy started firing airburst shells to which most of our soldiers were not accustomed. We suffered very heavy casualties and troops started pulling out from their defences. Enemy casualties were staggering too. In three consecutive attacks more than a hundred Pakistanis were killed. Eight of their troop-carrying vehicles burnt for three hours with dozens of enemy soldiers inside after being hit by our anti-tank shells. Then as it became a little dark, our troops started pulling back to the next defence position at Mastannagar. Enemy tanks joined the advancing troops and the battle caught up speed.

Before our troops could prepare their defences, heavy artillery shelling started on Mastannagar. Our troops could not be supplied with any food or water. Even ammunition could not be replenished. However, they stuck to their position as long as their ammunition lasted. The enemy launched attacks spearheaded by

tanks. Mastannagar position became untenable and I decided to pull back my troops to Hinguli area, a few miles south of Karerhat. A canal running east-west provided a good natural obstacle which could stop any attempt of quick onslaught. To prevent enemy tanks, the main bridge needed to he demolished. It was around midnight. Our troops, all tired and exhausted, quickly prepared their defences at Hinguli and awaited the next battle. But none could sleep. The Pakistanis advanced with caution and fear. Noise of their vehicles and tanks concentrating somewhere close to Hinguli could be heard clearly. Major Prodhan of the BSF and I were working against time to demolish the bridge.

Finally around 2 o'clock at night the bridge was ready for demolition and Major Prodhan left for Sabroom. I set a thirty seconds fuse and having ignited it ran for shelter. Seconds passed, then minutes. But the big bang did not come. It was a faulty fuse. One spare fuse that I had with me also turned out to be defective. There were hardly two hours to dawn by which the bridge had to be demolished. And the only place from where we could get some fuse was Ramgarh, 25 miles away from Hinguli. Through silence of the night, the noise of enemy tanks and vehicles was getting clearer and closer. A sudden dullness temporarily overtook me. It was three in the morning and I sent a frantic message for some fuses. We had no demolition stores and were fully dependent on the BSF for such supplies.

The defence at Hinguli was prepared in a haste in darkness and had to be readjusted in the morning. There

were all the risks that we might come under attack during the process of readjustment. Tanks would dash through the bridge and that could be fatal.

Then there was a strange coincidence. Major Prodhan contacted one of our rear positions to know about the bridge. Then he was told about my message. The officer immediately rushed to me with spare fuses. It was around 3-45 in the morning. I saw a jeep with dimmed light speeding towards my position near the bridge. Leaving the jeep a few hundred yards away Prodhan ran up to me and whispered, "I hope this one works." No, it did not. Finally, the fourth detonating fuse worked. The deafening explosion heard from miles away relieved much of our worries. The bridge was completely destroyed. "Lovely!" both of us exclaimed.

The enemy was only a mile away and his artillery was being deployed just a little behind. Daylight had broken. Quickly I set about to readjust the defences.

At this juncture one regular company received as reinforcement from Comilla sector was called away to some other battle front. On the main axis I was left with hardly a hundred men—mostly EPR, Police and Mujahids. Bulk of the troops were engaged in battles at Mahalchari and Narayanhat areas. The frontage to be covered at Hinguli was almost three miles. Whatever good weapons I had on this axis were taken away by the company from Comilla sector. There were two light machine-guns. Rest of the weapons were all obsolete ·303 rifles.

I descovered the existence of a 3-inch mortar which reportedly behaved sentimentally. Capt Oli was the only officer available on this axis and he was overworked, having gone through many battles. It was apparent that only a hundred men would not be able to withhold a determined attack by two enemy battalions for any reasonable period. Reinforcements that I had asked for from Narayanhat would need at least two days to arrive. I had to bargain and delay the enemy attack for those two days. If the enemy could know my actual strength he would immediately launch an attack. The area east of the bridge right up to the main hill range was an undulating ground interspersed with small mounds and hillocks which facilitated concealed movement of troops. This extended up to almost two miles. The area west of the bridge up to the seashore had to be left unprotected. We just did not have any more troops. I drew out about thirty soldiers and sent them in two groups towards the eastern and western directions. Their task was to present themselves in an area as if they were taking up defence. Then they were to lie down and crawl back behind some fields or orchards so that the backward movement remained undetected. Again they were to move to the same place in a conspicuous manner, fall back and repeat this process three to four times in one area. This would give the enemy an impression that there were fifty to sixty soldiers in that place although in actual fact the number was only fifteen men. The group was then moved to another location a few hundred yards away on the same

front and the same process continued till the evening. To anyone watching these movements the impression would be that 1500 to 2000 soldiers were making defence preparations on either side of the bridge all along the front. Meanwhile, the rest of the troops were taking up defence on the most dominating ground close to the bridge covering the road. By dusk all these preparations and the deceiving movements were complete.

This trick worked for some time. The entire frontage of our defence came under artillery shelling from that night and continued for two days. Yet the enemy did not launch any attack. Nor did my reinforcements arrive.

A serious threat had developed at that time. With continuous reinforcement from West Pakistan, more and more troops were rushed by the enemy to every axis of advance. A heavily reinforced column of a battalion supported by 120-mm mortars advanced towards Hiakhu via Fatikchari-Narayanhat. If successful, it would mean trapping of all our troops between Hiakhu and Karerhat-Hinguli bridge area. I had to abandon the idea of getting troops from Narayanhat which itself needed reinforcement.

XVII DEBACLE IN THE WESTERN FRONT

The tide of battle on the western front was changing rapidly. Jessore cantonment remained under a virtual siege for quite some time. Major Osman did not receive

any supply of arms or essential stores for going into an offensive.

On the other hand, the beleaguered garrison at Jessore received continuous flow of troops, arms and ammunition by C-130 transport planes. Other reinforcements were coming through Chalna port and along the highway connecting those areas with Dacca.

Troops were sent towards Goaland to prevent any landing attempt by the enemy. But Nagarbari remained undefended. Shortage of transport was the compelling factor. On April 11, Osman's HQ at Chuadanga came under aerial strafing and bombing.

On April 12, the enemy tried to land at Goaland but failed. Our troops had taken up position by then. That night another enemy column landed at Nagarbari without any difficulty.

Wasting no time, the enemy resumed advance towards Pabna. By April 13 he reached Pabna and headed for Bheramara in Kushtia district through Paksey bridge. Thus a serious threat developed in the rear of our forces in that sector.

Osman immediately sent troops to Paksey to deny the enemy the use of this bridge. On the night of April 13-14, fighting broke out near Paksey bridge. Osman's forces were fighting an isolated battle. They received no reinforcements nor any replenishment of ammunition. By next morning they had to abandon that area. Before withdrawing, they damaged the bridge partially rendering it unfit for train movement.

On April 14, the enemy reached Bheramara and resumed advance towards Kushtia-Jessore. Success of this column brought back life and courage to the besieged troops at Jessore cantonment. Simultaneously, troops from Jessore started fanning out in a link-up operation, supported by artillery and aircraft. Osman had till then received only a few ·303 rifles, two LMGs and two mortars. These were insufficient even to replenish one company.

On the other hand, the enemy strength was nearly of two brigades. Under a well-coordinated thrust by the enemy from the front as well as the rear, Osman was left with no choice but to move to the next alternative position. On April 15, as pressure mounted on all fronts Osman shifted his HQ to Meherpur from Chuadanga and started reorganising his defences. On April 19, he shifted again to a bordering post Ichakhali.

All these days our troops in the western front put up brave resistance inflicting heavy losses to the enemy in terms of both men and material. The enemy's superiority in manpower and firepower became the deciding factor. Thus by April 23, Jessore, Kushtia and Khulna had fallen to the enemy. The last hold was at Kagajpukur, a place six miles east of Benapole, where Osman set up a strong defence.

Early in the morning of April 24, the enemy opened up artillery barrage on this position, which was being defended by one EPR company. At 11 am the enemy attacked with two battalions. The first attack was re-

pulsed with substantial losses to the enemy. Soon after two more attacks were launched. Those were also repulsed. There was only one machine-gun and this took the heaviest toll of enemy soldiers.

Suddenly the machine-gunner was hit by a bullet and he fell. N/Sub Mujib of EPR rushed through a shower of bullets and started firing with the same gun. Single-handedly, he wiped out a whole platoon of the enemy. Then he found a group of soldiers in EPR dress approaching his position through the fields from one of the flanks. When those troops were hardly thirty yards away N/Sub Mujib realised those were enemy troops in EPR dress. It was too late then. He was surrounded by two enemy platoons. He kept firing till he was overpowered and bayonetted to death on the spot. With the silencing of this machine-gun, Kagajpukur defence started crumbling. By evening that day it was all over. Osman's troops withdrew to the Indian border. And with that the first phase of battle in the western front came to an end. Other fronts were about to face the same debacle.

XVIII PRAYING FOR OTHERS

Karerhat, once a busy market place on Chittagong-Dacca highway, was a deserted place on April 24. Not a single human being could be seen anywhere except for the liberation forces who were taking up new defence after withdrawing from Hinguli bridge area. A civilian

manning the only telephone at Karerhat fled the night before when an artillery shell burst nearby.

From Karerhat a road branches off towards Ramgarh through the hills. It was well understood that the fall of Karerhat would threaten Ramgarh as well as Shubapur bridge over the Feni river. Its fall would also mean a loss of control over the highway which was vital to the enemy from logistic and supply points of view. However, manpower available to me was insufficient even to fight a delaying battle—not to speak of holding Karerhat.

The troops on the other hand had been fighting the enemy since March 25. The hardest reality for them was that after putting up a delaying battle they had to withdraw. A certain psychological trend had set in in their mind to retreat to the next position. No amount of assurances and encouragement could change their pattern of fighting. Better and effective weapon, relief and reinforcement were all that they needed to regain confidence. This war, ironically, was devoid of all those luxuries as far as we were concerned.

That day I received news that our troops at Mahalchari were engaged in a pitched battle with the enemy who were reinforced by two brigades of the Mizos. Our troops were almost surrounded and unless reinforcements were received they would be unable even to pull out to safety. Similar news was received from Narayanhat area where the enemy succeeded in controlling the vital road junctions.

Thirty men were pulled out immediately and sent to Mahalchari. This weakened Karerhat position dangerously. With the remaining seventy men, I set out to prepare a defence, covering the main road. The hill range remained undefended. Deceiving tactics similar to those I had used in Hinguli bridge area were employed here as well. By 3 pm those actions were complete. Under a scorching sun we consumed our meal of fried rice, molasses and muddy canal water. It tasted better than a similar dinner the previous night.

From the forward lines I was returning to Karerhat school area half a mile behind. Artillery shells were landing everywhere at regular intervals. I found two women running to and fro. There were three huts, all razed to the ground. Smell of gunpowder filled the air. Smoke was still rising from one of the huts. A local boy in his teens was lying in a pool of blood. He was in two pieces—cut clean through the belly by a shell fragment. His eyes were wide open and still with horror.

"Do not run. Just lie down till the shelling is over," I shouted at them. They looked at me, dazed. A deep dry canal separated us.

"Who are you ?" one of them asked me in a low deeply-hurt voice.

"We are your children," I replied and started moving back to the school area.

I saw her kneeling down by the dead, raising her bony trembling hands towards the sky in prayer. The ratt-

ling of tanks was getting closer. Artillery, mortars, machine-guns and rifles were all firing in a strange harmony.

Dusk fell. A vehicle brought food. En route, some other group, may be some evacuees, kept food for themselves. They sent us some food too.

All battle noise had stopped temporarily. Tired and exhausted, I lay in the open. The grass was soft and the air was cool. I thought of the war, of freedom. All seemed to be far away. And the prayers of the old woman were ringing in my ears: "Allah, I do not pray for my dead son. Help these children who are fighting for my country." Emotion swelled up in me. "So great is this nation! How proud and honoured I am to be fighting for such people. God will perhaps listen to her, for she is praying for others."

"God must," I murmured to myself. Tears rolled down my cheeks.

XIX A POINT OF NO RETURN

It is difficult to recollect the days towards the end of April. The savage war seemed to blind nature from our view. Every day the sun rose in the east from far behind the hills. As it traversed a routine course disappearing finally into the vast expanse of the Bay of Bengal, it left behind thousands of human dead, all victims of war and hatred. These dead could be seen everywhere

as far as one could strain his eyes or even his imagination to see.

The air smelt mostly of gunpowder and rotten human flesh. The sound of rifles, machine-guns and all other weapons of war could be heard uninterrupted, moving far away towards the countryside as the days passed by. At night, plumes of smoke could be seen curling up towards the sky with crimson glow in the distant horizon. Down at the tail of that rising smoke were Pakistani soldiers shouting some of their battle cries in a wild and primitive frenzy of murder, rape, plunder and destruction. Far away from that reign of tyranny, a freedom fighter in his trench or a terrified village woman moving away with her belongings to safety would stare at the distant fires in despair. The brutality of the Pakistanis betrayed even human imagination.

Pakistan Army's brutality kept up a mounting pace. In occupied areas they established a reign of terror unprecedented in human history. From the pattern of enemy activities it became clear that they worked in three distinct groups.

The first was the assaulting group whose task was to capture an objective. This group performed the tasks of the second and the third groups as well whenever time or situation permitted.

The assaulting group was followed by a cadre of the army whose task was to rape and kill. They were answerable to none. The main purpose of the Pakistan Government was probably to terrorise our people and to change the genetic pattern of the Bengali race.

The second group was followed by a group of criminals who looted every house and then set it on fire. The government supplied these groups with petrol, kerosene and other inflammable items. These groups perpetrated their brutalities on the innocent Bengalis and made their life a veritable hell. It is reported that a large number of convicted criminals were transferred from the West Pakistan jails to Bangladesh and set free to commit these atrocities.

But all those cruelties failed to achieve the desired result. Resistance became stiffer as the days passed by. Our soldiers stuck to their position as long as they had even one bullet to be fired at the enemy. Occasionally, some dare-devil would leave his position, sneak through the enemy defences, get his share of the kill and return to his post. Some never returned. But the process of attrition was on.

Victory is, however, never complete in itself. The causes reponsible for a victory have on many occasions been the causes of defeat under changed circum tances. History may or may not repeat itself but mankind have always been repeating the tragedy of history. The rise and fall of nations, civilisations, dictators, great invaders—all bear testimony to that truth. What saves a nation or what may one day save mankind from a great holocaust is goodness in man—sanity of leaders who learn the hard lessons of history. But Yahya Khan had learnt very little, if at all, from history and he was a non-believer in what had been learnt from others' experience. Had that not been so Yahya probably would

not have ventured on that perilous undertaking—military solution to a political problem. But it was too late. The arrow of error had been shot. It was a point of no return. Every Bengali, true to his blood, hated the Pakistanis. The image of that one nation was smeared with contempt and blood. Pakistan lost the support of the Bengalis for ever. And this lack of public support slowed down the enemy advance on all fronts. Enemy's victory was to be off-balanced very soon by the will of the people. That, however, took some time. Meanwhile, the enemy was temporarily successful in his military action in so far as occupying more and more land was concerned.

XX WRONG STRATEGY

On April 25, Karerhat fell to the enemy. Two other columns heading for Ramgarh from different directions made slow but steady progress. One was heading for Hiakhu from Narayanhat and the other headed for Ramgarh from the direction of Mahalchari. From Karerhat the enemy moved a column to the east in a bid to capture the first hill range towards Ramgarh. Another group moved towards Shubapur bridge on the Feni river where one of the fiercest battles of the war was fought a fortnight later.

Hiakhu, a small market place half way between Karerhat and Ramgarh, became the next focal point for Ramgarh battle. Somehow, enemy intelligence became almost

certain that the main HQ of Chittagong sector was at Ramgarh. This was true to some extent but not wholly. Here, we did have small dumps of fuel and foodgrains, one small makeshift hospital to treat our injured soldiers and a small camp where we had been training freedom fighters in the use of arms and explosives since the 2nd week of April. But we had made all preparations to shift everything to an alternative and secured place. However, Ramgarh became a prestige issue for us since it was the last subdivisional HQ physically under our control and all possible steps were taken to defend it. A number of bridges were demolished and strong defences taken on a wider perimeter covering likely axis of approach, keeping in view the limitation of resources.

Earlier, once Karerhat had fallen and the enemy was getting closer to Hiakhu, tactically it became unsound to keep any troops between Hiakhu and Karerhat. There were chances of their getting trapped. All our troops were, therefore, withdrawn and concentrated in Hiakhu area.

Further east, our troops at Mahalchari area had been intercepted by the enemy. They were sending frantic messages for more men, arms and ammunition. We had nothing more to spare.

By that time, some semblance of a high military command had been established by the Provisional Government of Bangladesh. Commanders in the battlefield, however, received no coordinated orders. To be precise,

there was no operational order at all. "Enemy advance must be halted at all costs" was the only order we had been receiving from that invisible high command. This cry was devoid of any appreciation of the situation in the battlefield. It was practicable to delay enemy advance but extremely difficult to halt such advance without the equipment and material needed in that bloody game. Someone failed to understand that logic and was passing whimsical, incoherent orders. Our troops soon lost faith in this invisible high command and became doubtful about the veiy existence of such a command.

On April 27, the Pakistanis attacked our troops at Mahalchari area. There were two Mizo brigades of approximately three thousand fighters and a regular commando company of the Pakistan Army. Our troops had no training in mountain warfare. Owing to this lack of training in specialised warfare and shortage of resources our troops suffered a set-back at Mahalchari.

Employing the Chinese tactics of sending human assaulting waves, the Pakistanis pushed the Mizos in the frontal assault. Attacks were, launched one after another and they were all beaten back. The Mizos suffered heavily. But they could not even withdraw. The Pakistani commando company was sitting behind them, positioned in such a manner as to shoot down any Mizo trying to withdraw to safety. Fighting continued for the whole day. Mizos in small batches manoeuvred towards the flanks taking covered approach through

the hills and succeeded in occupying some dominating hills which overlooked our defences as well as the vital road link with Ramgarh.

The battle took a critical turn. Our troops were heavily outnumbered and almost encircled. But our officers and the troops fought bravely and extricated themselves from encirclement. Major Showkat conducted the battle courageously and the enemy suffered substantial losses. We lost a young officer, Capt Kader. Accepting gravest risks, he moved to occupy a dominating ground and assist our troops in withdrawing safely. He reachde his objective and then, a burst from a light machine-gun riddled his body. He died the death of a hero. But the first officer dead in the battle demoralised our troops.

On April 29, fighting broke out near Hiakhu. The area in front of our defences was open land but the flanks were covered with dense forests on small hillocks facilitating undetected large-scale infiltration to the rear. That could have completely isolated us from our supply base at Ramgarh. We did not even have cooking facilities and food supply had to come mostly from Ramgarh.

It was a bright sunny day and from the early morning a number of attacks were launched on our position preceded by heavy mortar shelling. Leading the enemy towards our position under cover of shelling were about two hundred local collaborators. Hardly fifty yards behind the locals, two enemy companies moved through the open field in attack formation. When they were within a hundred yards we opened fire. For some time

it was all confusion and panic amongst the attacking troops. A few in the rear managed to escape. The rest, dead or injured, all lay in the battlefield. Within a very short time another attack was launched. This time, an enemy battalion in two groups attacked both the right and the left flanks of our defences. This attack continued for almost two hours. We suffered some casualties and then the troops were ordered to pull back towards Chickanchara.

With the fall of Hiakhu, the fall of Ramgarh became inevitable. Moreover, the escape route for the civilians was almost closed, especially for the larger groups. So far they had been coming in thousands every day along that dusty road through Narayanhat to Hiakhu, then to Ramgarh, till they were finally able to move to Sabroom across the Feni River.

Sabroom had a very small population and all through had been a quiet place. Since the beginning of April its population started swelling owing to the onrush of evacuees from Chittagong and the Chittagong Hill Tracts. They came from all walks of life.

They came in family groups, at times even an entire village trekked that distance of more than a hundred miles. Everyone, rich and poor alike, had to walk that distance. No transport was available. A bullock cart was a luxury since we had pressed into service all available bullock carts (even for evacuation of casualties). The sufferings of the uprooted masses of people on that painful and arduous journey cannot be easily des-

cribed. Those who had to undergo those sufferings will recollect the journey only as a nightmare and not as a reality.

Those victims of human cruelty used to take their first breath of relief at Ramgarh. Most of the people broke down at the end of their journey. What lay ahead they did not know. And added to their misery was a time-consuming process of documentation for entry into Indian soil. That was not the end. Once in India they had to wait for further documentation without which they would not receive any relief supplies. Silently and helplessly, the evacuees had to undergo the tortuous process of documentation. The rush of evacuees was so heavy that the entire Indian Government momentarily got bogged down in an effort to shift those uprooted people to some organised camps and arrange meagre supplies for their bare survival. This man-made problem had by then taken a catastrophic magnitude. When all the normal routes were closed owing to advance of Pakistani soldiers, the flight of an endless number of terror-stricken people continued unabated. They all had a hope to return home some day. When, they did not know.

After the fall of Karerhat, we realised that present tactics of our fighting could achieve very little for us. Troops were all disorganised and the defending forces were a heterogenous combination of EPR, Police, Ansars, Mujahids, army personnel and newly trained freedom fighters sent to the battlefield with just a week's training.

There was a lack of cohesion and that was one of the reasons for our set-back. It was imperative to get all the troops into a camp, secured and undisturbed, where they could be given rest and medical treatment and organised into a cohesive force. Most of our troops were suffering from malnutrition by that time.

Accordingly, a secret camp site was selected at Harina, six miles inside India. A few tents and bivouacs received from the Indian authorities were set up immediately. Certain stores were shifted from Ramgarh to this camp. Battle casualties and the sick were transferred to the camp hospital. The task of regrouping our forces was to be undertaken only when troops were all free from fighting.

The Provisional Government of Bangladesh set up at Mujibnagar was trying to obtain recognition from other countries. This was a difficult task and it was evident that unless Bangladesh forces had some sizeable territory under their firm control no country would recognise our government. In the initial days of fighting such a territory could have been held anywhere in Bangladesh by mobilising all forces for the defence of that territory. Such a decision should have been taken without loss of any time. Somehow it seemed that the authorities chose to fight the enemy in every front and hoped to win. Militarily that was an unsound proposition keeping in mind our limitation of supplies and troops. In the process of fighting everywhere, troops got dispersed, and the poor communication

system forced our troops to fight isolated local battles having no bearing on the ultimate strategy. Thus one by one we lost every strategic area.

The troops from Mahalchari reached Ramgarh on April 30 and were moving in small groups to Harina camp. Prior to their arrival we were asked by the authorities to be prepared to withdraw from Ramgarh. This we interpreted as the high command's inability to meet our supply requirements without which we could not fight for more than three days. Strangely enough, on the night of April 30, we received a new order : "Hold Ramgarh for the Government of Bangladesh." By then we had pulled out our troops from Chikanchara and were having only delaying positions ahead of Ramgarh to ensure the safe withdrawal of all our troops to Harina. The enemy was only a few miles away from Ramgarh. Half of our troops were walking down the road.

However, on receipt of that message from the highest authorities, all available troops were rushed for the defence of Ramgarh. A contingent of the Indian Army also reached Sabroom perhaps to check any intrusion by the Pakistan Army into Indian soil. The move of the Indian Army contingent created some misunderstanding. Rumour spread that the Indian Army might participate in the defence of Ramgarh. That was not true.

From May 1, the enemy started shelling the outskirts of Ramgarh. One column resumed advancing along the main road. Another column moved to the hills southeast of Ramgarh. Between these hills and

Ramgarh there was a flat and open ground. Enemy build-up behind those hills on the night of May 1-2 went undetected.

The Pakistanis launched a decisive thrust towards Ramgarh in the morning of May 2. Under cover of heavy artillery shelling they broke through our first defence lines along the main road. Strong bunkers were being gradually destroyed by anti-tank weapons. A smoke-screen was created between the hills and Ramgarh. Behind this screen the second enemy column moved in attack formation towards the central portion of Ramgarh. An hour before dusk an enemy battalion launched final attack in the central position and overran our defences. For more than an hour after this our troops in the flanks continued firing on the enemy, finally withdrawing under cover of darkness when they ran out of ammunition.

The entire civil population of Sabroom had vacated the town earlier and moved towards the interior. Bullets were flying all over—occasionally hitting buildings and trees on the Indian side. The Indian Army and the Border Security Forces (BSF) had taken position in their trenches. That day they were mere spectators. A wireless intercept of the enemy read: "Rebel HQ at Ramgarh captured."

That night the enemy set fire to the houses in Ramgarh. The entire market was in flames. Through the swirling cloud of black smoke, through the crimson fire-balls one could only catch glimpses of the hazy

crestline of the hills. Beyond that was a land of dreams—of hope, for which we would fight relentlessly.

How long? None could tell.

XXI BATTLE OF SHUBAPUR BRIDGE

The loss of Ramgarh was a great set-back for us. Although an alternative HQ was established at Harina, we could not reconcile to the idea of fighting the enemy from a shelter in Indian territory. At Ramgarh, we felt ease and comfort. It was our own land. Everything belonged to us. But Harina was in Indian soil. And there was the big difference. With the fall of Ramgarh we felt we had lost everything. Our dreams were shattered. Some of us cried like children. Others were so dazed with shock and sorrow that they simply dragged their feet and moved towards Harina—as if in a dream. Slung across their shoulders were ancient weapons of destruction. Their ammunition pouches were empty.

Shubapur bridge on the main highway became the next focal point. A portion of the bridge was demolished by us with the help of the Indian BSF. Strong bunkers were prepared under direct supervision of Lt Col Ghosh of 92 BSF. We had only a hundred men, mostly civilians, trained for seven days. EPR Subedar Fakruddin was given the task of defending this bridge. All we aimed at was to deny the use of this vital bridge to the enemy and keep his supply line with Comilla and Dacca cut off.

When Karerhat fell, we were forced to withdraw our troops from the southern part of the bridge. The northern part was being defended with grim determination. We knew the enemy would stake everything to capture it. His artillery was deployed at Karerhat and a few tanks were moved up to the river bank. While artillery kept pounding our defence, his tanks started destroying our bunkers one by one. We suffered a numbei of casualties owing to direct hit from tank firing. We had a few anti-tank weapons but no ammunition.

Under cover of heavy tank and artillery fire, the Pakistanis tried a few river-crossing operations. All those failed. On two occasions, the enemy troops when halfway across the river were caught in a cross fire. In broad daylight they were picked up one by one and shot. It was like a target shooting practice at ease. More than two companies were wiped out. Their bodies drifted down the river towards the sea. Thereafter, the Pakistanis gave up the idea of any river-crossing operation to capture the bridge.

Meanwhile, Feni town fell to the enemy advancing from Comilla cantonment. By May 11, they were very close to Shubapur bridge.

Enemy strength in this column was estimated to be of two battalions. Fewer than a hundred freedom fighters defending Shubapur bridge awaited the final assault. It came the next day.

Since the morning of May 12, the enemy artillery resumed heavy shelling from Kare hat. Enemy tanks moved up to the river bank. Two smoke-screens were made to the north and the west of our defences. Emerging through the smoke-screen, two companies launched the first attack at 11 am from the west. This was repulsed with heavy losses to the enemy. Then there was a pause. At 3 pm the Pakistanis restarted with intense artillery fire. This time both the battalions participated in the attack.

One battalion moved from the west and the other from the north. Throughout the day our troops were subjected to the severest artillery shelling. Fifty per cent of them had suffered injuries from shell splinters. Some of them were buried alive when the bunkers collapsed under direct hits. Casualties could not be removed nor could any reinforcement be sent. Our troops were also without food and water. Around 5 pm, artillery fire was lifted. The enemy was then 300 yards away from our defences. Only one machine-gun and two light machine-guns were engaging the enemy. A large number of Pakistani soldiers had been killed before those three weapons were destroyed by tank fire. Our troops continued firing with only ·303 rifles. Soon hand-to-hand fighting broke out. We were heavily outnumbered by the enemy. Those of our troops who were closer to the Indian border could ultimately withdraw. Almost all of them were seriously injured. But they were still not demoralised.

Dusk fell. An unmetalled road from Sreenagar outpost (in India) close to Shubapur bridge curls its way through the hills towards the main road leading to Agartala. That evening it was deserted. Only a few people were quietly moving along that road. They were moving away from the battlefield. Some walked with the help of sticks. Others were being carried by their comrades. As they passed one of our officers, one of them raised his left hand in salutation. His right arm was dangling and bleeding. A shell splinter had broken it almost in two pieces. A thin strip of skin somehow kept his arm attached to his shoulder in a precarious balance. Pain was clearly visible in his face. And yet with a soft smile he wished us good evening and moved on with the others. A little away they all disappeared in the darkness.

XXII RETREAT FROM BELONIA

Towards the middle of May, some sort of rethinking started at every level and a new phase of reorganisation was planned for. Till then the future strategy of the war had not been decided and the operational responsibility of assisting us remained with the Indian Border Security Forces (BSF) who had made their best and sincere efforts to help us. In some cases they even went out of their way to assist us. But their resources were limited as compared to those normally available with an army facing such a war.

On May 15, the Eastern Command of the Indian Army took over the responsibilities of all supplies as well as of the entire operational coordination. This change over did not mean direct involvement of the Indian Army in our war of liberation. Yet this was a very significant step taken by the Indian Government and perhaps implied an indirect involvement of the Indian war machinery. Gradually this involvement became deeper. It was bound to be so.

After Shubapur, the last territory under our control was the bulge of Belonia where some of the fiercest battles of the war were fought. It was being defended by 150 of our troops. The western half of the bulge divided by the Muhuri river was being defended by the troops of Major Khaled Musharraf. We needed more troops but as at that time certain units were being raised for the Bangladesh Army, we had to send a large number of our trained personnel to Tura for intensive training. The left-overs were being organised into small detachments and trained at the base camp on our own initiative. The idea of committing everything for that last territory at Belonia was discarded. All we wanted was to inflict maximum casualties on the enemy and nothing more than that. Capturing of territory and holding it was left for the future when we would have sufficient trained manpower, fully equipped and clothed.

On May 26, our troops blew up an important bridge at Chandgazi to strengthen Belonia defences.

On May 27, two of my EPR sepoys who were on duty at Chittagong airport and were arrested by the Pakistan

Army on March 25 crossed over to India and surrendered to me. They were carrying two hand grenades each; these they kept at my feet and started weeping.

"Why are you carrying these grenades?" I asked.

"We were given these grenades by a Pakistani Major to kill you," was their answer.

The Pakistanis kept on sending such arrested persons to kill us throughout the war. They were sent with the promise of heavy ransom. In many cases their families were kept as hostages. But the Pakistanis never succeeded in their attempt to kill the limited number of Bengali officers fighting for freedom.

To change the topic I asked them, "Any information ?" "Yes, sir. Three tanks have crossed Shubapur and are moving towards Chagalnaiya". Those were moving for the Belonia battle. However, it took a long time to develop. The enemy was only concentrating troops, tanks and artillery for Belonia.

On June 6, the Pakistanis attacked Chandgazi position with two companies. It was a probing attack and continued for two hours. Our troops engaged the enemy with mortar and machine-gun fire. Correct information supplied by patriotic civilians about concentration areas helped our mortar crew to engage the enemy with pin-point accuracy. The Pakistanis were taken by surprise when mortar shells started bursting on them killing and injuring many. Owing to non-availability of ammunition we had been unable to use mortars for quite some time. For Belonia we received some ammunition and it

was used effectively. In a state of panic they ran towards Chagalnaiya. Some of our troops left their trenches and chased the enemy through the fields. For almost 10 days after this it was all quiet.

The use of aircraft for trafing and bombing our defences in Belonia bulge was risky for the Pakistan Air Force since the area was too narrow to allow any space for manoeuvre. There were chances of violating Indian airspace which could invite retaliation from the Indian Air Force. We were optimistic that the enemy would not take that risk.

On June 16, the enemy attacked Chandgazi at dawn. This was repulsed. On June 17 and 18, a number of similar attacks were made. Every time they were beaten back. Finally on June 19, the enemy carried out a combined operation against us. Five helicopters landed enemy troops behind our defences while two infantry battalions under artillery cover launched a desperate offensive. They failed to make much headway and, as on previous occasions, suffered very heavy casualties. But the situation deteriorated when a large number of heliborne troops began converging on to our defences from the rear. All our soldiers were likely to be trapped. That night the decision was taken to withdraw from Chandgazi. Thereafter, we were holding no territory in Bangladesh. The second phase of our struggle was about to begin.

XXIII CRITICAL PROBLEMS

Our final withdrawal from Bangladesh after the loss of Belonia bulge on the right of June 19-20, was received calmly by all. We were holding no territory of our own except for a few square miles along the Indian border in Comilla and Sylhet sectors. A long-drawn protracted guerrilla warfare had taken its birth. The war in Vietnam with its glories and shames, triumphs and tragedies reminded every one of us that we were not alone in our sufferings, nor in mankind's eternal desire to strive and suffer for freedom.

It was a far away dream. Yet everyone was guessing in his own way. Some hoped a quick Indian involvement. Others relied on our own strength and calculated that the road to freedom would be a long journey of 20 years or more.

There was, however, no indication of India's desire to get involved in an armed conflict at that stage. Firstly, India had to mobilise world opinion, if not in favour of an armed intervention to relieve the Bengalis of their sufferings, at least to condemn the atrocities committed by the Pakistan Army. Secondly, India had for long been painted as an enemy of the Muslims in the subcontinent. Until such time as a new favourable image had been created, the Indian Army was not likely to receive full cooperation from the people and Indian intervention was likely to be misunderstood and misinterpreted even

in Bangladesh. Thirdly, the Indian Army was not fully prepared to meet such an operational requirement in Bangladesh. Most of the Indian troops in Eastern Command were committed to dealing with Naga and Mizo rebels as well as the Naxalites in West Bengal. East Pakistan did not feature prominently in Indian military maps.

The best part of the Indian Army was poised against China and West Pakistan. Complete regrouping of forces was essential before going into any action in Bangladesh. At the same time full preparations were to be made to face any retaliatory action along the western or the Chinese front. China in those days openly supported the Pakistan Government and criticised India for the situation created in Bangladesh. Curiously enough, China remained silent about the freedom fighters or the freedom movement itself. Last and the most important of all, India as well as its most trusted ally Russia was to be convinced of the Bengalis' determination to achieve freedom and accept the greatest amount of hardship in achieving that goal. Till October India was hesitant. But then she had to take a decision. The cost of feeding almost 10 million refugees approached the mark of 525 crore taka annually. Foreign aid promised was barely 112.5 crore taka. The balance of 412.5 crore taka was to be borne by India. It was a heavy drainage on the Indian exchequer. A lightning and decisive offensive would be much cheaper. Moreover, such a large number of people in the Indian soil was likely to create enormous social, economic and, worst of all,

political problems. The sooner conditions could be created for their voluntary return to Bangladesh, the better. However, Yahya Khan did not relish the idea.

Although Pakistani propaganda machinery was trying to make the world believe that everything was normal in Bangladesh and the evacuees were returning home, the truth was something quite different. Every day thousands of refugees were rushing towards India in what may be termed 'the greatest exodus in known history'.

They came by boats, by rafts, by bullock carts. They came on foot. The old and the sick were carried on shoulders, on stretchers. But they all looked alike. Many died en route. They were left to rot as feast for the vultures and the jackals. Others were caught by Pakistani soldiers, lined up and shot. A woman with her only child of one month hid in a jute field with others on seeing a Pakistani patrol party passing close by. The child cried. Afraid of being detected, the woman pressed her hand hard on the child's face. For how long she did not know. The child was dead long before the patrol party disappeared.

Another family while crossing the border was caught and taken by the soldiers to their camp. There, in front of the parents, soldiers raped the grown up daughter till she fainted.

"We will help you cross the border," they promised. The following night, the family was taken near the border. There they shot her parents, laughed amongst

themselves and carried the girl back to the camp. A month later her body was found near a bush, half eaten by the jackals.

And yet, 10 million people managed to cross over to India. Many camps were set up to accommodate the evacuees. But accommodation was an impossible task. Only a few thousand took shelter with their relations. Most of the people lived on the road side, at railway stations, at the airports, in schools and colleges. They could be found everywhere—in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, West Bengal. They had escaped the wrath of Pakistani soldiers but not death. Epidemics broke out in a number of camps claiming share of the dead—mostly children and old people. Medicine was scarce ; doctors were few.

The situation was no better in the youth camps. These camps were established to accommodate Bengali young men who went to India for training. At the initial stage, an average of 500 to 1000 young people reported at these camps daily. The camps used to receive their supplies of ration on the basis of a certain capacity. In most cases, 1000 additional people used to be fed curtailing everyone's quota of food. At times we had been supporting the youth camps with rations from our military camps. But this was possible only where the youth camps were close by. Not always.

Other problems were equally acute. Most of the people came in one piece of cloth and nothing more. Owing to overcrowding, the hygienic condition in the camps could not be kept satisfactory. Blood dysentery broke

out in an epidemic form. There were many deaths due to non-availability of medicines. Malaria, influenza and gastro-intestinal diseases were too common and wide-spread in all those camps.

The inhabitants of the camps created numerous problems. Political rivalry, jealousy, lack of self-respect and discipline hindered smooth functioning. On many occasions they fought among themselves on such trifling matters as who would sleep in which barrack. Once away from the tortures, humiliation and sufferings in Bangladesh many of these young people forgot what they were in India for. The blame would, however, rest with the camp commanders and some of the political leaders. There was a tragic lack of any effort to motivate them correctly.

The lowest number of freedom fighters came from industrial labour. It was surprising that in Chittagong sector alone, out of about one lakh workers, hardly a hundred turned up for training during the war. Labour leaders contacted us very late—only towards the middle of October.

The most problematic of all were the educated groups. It is true, with their education and political awakening they were always vocal and fearless against all oppression and injustice. But in this war they were more deeply involved in party politics. Most of them wanted to be given special training, special food—as a matter of fact, everything special. And then after training they wanted the best arms, good clothing and to be let loose inside Bangladesh—a proposition that could not be accepted.

If anyone with a little more experience in warfare would advise them as to how and where they should fight, it used to be misinterpreted as an attempt at dictating to them. A certain complex possessed them ; they were reluctant to obey orders. Just after two weeks of training they were dreaming of becoming Che Guevara, Mao Tse Tung, Rommel and so on. That the Bengali army people were their own brothers, fighting for the same cause with much better military background, was lost sight of. A sense of false pride and vanity had taken possession of them. Everyone wanted to be a group leader, Thana leader, district leader and so on. No one was willing to work under anybody's command.

The peasants, condemned and exploited for ever, turned out to be the best material for the type of warfare we were in. They had little to gain and almost nothing to lose. Unspoiled by any complex, vanity or pride, they were sincere and dedicated to the cause of freedom. Not even once did I find them grumbling for a pair of jungle boots, a lungi, a blanket, or even for food. These simple unambitious people fought bravely wherever they were assigned.

Some of the public leaders, mostly in the lower echelons, behaved irresponsibly in those days. To them, liberation of Bangladesh was useful but the most important thing was who took over the leadership when the country was free. They counted Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as lost and a bitter struggle for political supremacy was on, though as an under-current. This, at one stage,

almost divided the ruling party. More damage was done by political rivalry within the party than by any outside interference. And that did have a repercussion on our struggle for freedom.

There was another critical problem. Screening and selection of freedom fighters before training was done in the youth camps by political leaders. There were complaints that suitable candidates were refused selection if found to be holding views of differing political complexion. This created resentment.

Near Sreenagar outpost in India an over-enthusiastic Bengali politician (not of Awami League) organised a small training camp and with local assistance from BSF started training a few freedom fighters. Soon this became a matter of political dispute. The Indian Government was requested to close it down since other parties did not like the idea of a separate training camp where people with different political motivations could be trained.

However, a large number of freedom fighters having no political leanings still found their way into the training camps. This happened in every sector since the sector commanders were interested only in selecting suitable patriotic people irrespective of their political affiliations. Unfortunately, this sincere effort was misunderstood and misinterpreted. Many of us were dubbed Naxalites, leftists and so on. For long we were viewed with suspicion.

Despite all these difficulties, we had to carry on. Our aim was clear. Very few of us, if at all, had any ambition beyond the achievement of freedom. There were numerous problems to be resolved before a serious "going" on that difficult path could be resumed. On July 9, I received an IMMEDIATE message to proceed to Calcutta to attend the first conference of all sector commanders.

XXIV A DELAYED CONFERENCE

On July 10, I boarded a plane of the Indian Airlines at Agartala. Stopping at Gauhati for half an hour, we were over Calcutta by 8-30 pm. A heavy monsoon downpour accompanied by a fast wind was lashing the city down below. After several attempts, the pilot succeeded in landing. It was 9 pm and a nerve-wrecking journey of four hours through foul weather was over.

Calcutta was a strange city and I was a total stranger there. Although my flight timings were intimated to the Bangladesh Army HQ on Theatre Road there was no one at the airport to receive or guide me. I felt dejected and wondered what everyone could have been busy with at Theatre Road. We did not expect any of our VIPs coming to receive us. But even a sepoy as guide could have been helpful.

After pacing the airport building up and down for some time, I hired a taxi and asked the Sikh driver to take me

to Bangladesh Army HQ. We could not locate the HQ at night and I asked the driver to take me to a medium-standard hotel.

My hair and beard had both grown like wild grass as if in competition with each other. A pair of torn dirty canvas shoes, an oversized shirt, a trouser and a satchel in which I carried some official papers were all my possession. The Sikh driver must have been a humorous fellow for he took me to a costly hotel. Entering the air-conditioned reception room of the hotel I got a shock and out of a normal physical reflex I touched my purse. A group of men and women, all attired in expensive costumes, glanced curiously at me. Quickly recovering from a feeling of 'out of place', I asked the receptionist, "Could I have a room?" He scanned me through the corner of his eyes— my shoes, trouser, shirt, the satchel and the beard. Then he grinned and asked, "Are you from——?" I said, "Yes, I am from Bangladesh."

The next morning, I left the hotel after paying almost half of whatever I had as rent for the night's stay. All the way up the Bangladesh Forces HQ I was cursing the Shikh driver for having taken me to that hotel.

The conference lasted from July 11 to 17, starting daily in the morning and ending at night. All the sector commanders were present there to discuss our difficulties and decide on a unified course of action. Till then, we had all been working without any coordination of thought or action.

Our first session was with Mr Tajuddin in the chair. We got bogged down at the very outset when Colonel Osmany (later General) expressed his unwillingness to remain commander-in-chief of the Bangladesh Forces. It was a difficult situation. Although out of active service Colonel Osmany was the seniormost Bengali army officer and, under the circumstances, the Bangladesh Army had none more suitable to take his place.

Colonel Osmany justified his decision by bitterly criticising some of the sector commanders for having disobeyed his orders. In his own words : "It was meaningless to be a C-in-C only on paper."

To most of us at the conference the whole thing came as a surprise. We had no idea that there were others interested to be the C-in-C and that they had manoeuvred a great deal. Unaccustomed to such high-level power politics, we were puzzled and looked at each other trying to guess who could be so ambitious. We all realised that a division amongst ourselves in those critical days was bound to invite doom for our future.

Fortunately, the impasse ended as abruptly as it had arisen thanks to Mr Tajuddin's personal effort. Colonel Osmany changed his decision and agreed to continue as the C-in-C. From the next day we began discussing the war. Inter-sector boundaries were worked out defining clearly the areas of operational responsibility. Requirements of the forces were worked out after detailed discussions. The liberation forces were divided into the following groups:

Regular army battalions. The few existing battalions formed the nucleus of the Bangladesh Army. The battalions were under-strength in all respects. This deficiency was met by drawing manpower from every sector. These were then formed into brigade groups and nicknamed K Force, S Force and Z Force.

Sector troops. EPR, Police and army personnel not absorbed into the battalions were formed into units and sub-units to fight in their respective sectors. Sector troops had to have lesser firepower as compared to the regular battalions.

Groups 1 and 2 were popularly known as Mukti Fouz (MF), Mukti Bahini or the regulars and were subjected to army rules and regulations. They were entitled to a reasonable sum of money as subsistence allowance although they did not receive any pay. Officially they were termed Niyomito Bahini.

Irregulars or Freedom Fighters (FF). People trained to fight the enemy in an unconventional manner were known as Freedom Fighters and officialy termed irregulars or Gono Bahini. They did not come under any army rules or regulations and a visible lack of discipline in many cases was characteristic of this group. However, we did not expect anything better and it was assumed that a long and hard struggle would automatically inculcate self-discipline into them. They were popularly known as guerrillas.

The irregulars were entitled to neither pay nor any subsistence allowance. After training, when they were sent into Bangladesh they were paid some money to meet their expenses en route. This was known as induction money. Based on the estimated strength and organisation of regulars (MF) and irregulars (FF) we worked out the detailed requirements of clothing, ration, arms and ammunition, wireless and telephone sets, compasses and binoculars. A consolidated list of all essential stores was prepared by us sectorwise and submitted to the government. Our government had to procure those items from the Goverrment of India. We had a bitter experience in the matter of procurement of arms and ammunition. Most of our initial set-backs could undoubtedly be attributed to this problem. There was no uniformity in the types of weapons used in the sectors. Some were China-made, some British, some American and so on. This seriously affected our supply of ammunition. We were now promised standard weapons from one single source, presumably India-made.

There was an acute shortage of vehicles. Whatever we had was mostly out of commission owing to non-availability of spare parts. It was agreed that the maximum number of vehicles would be made roadworthy—if needed by cannibalization. EME (Electrical Mechanical and Equipment) detachments of the Indian Army were entrusted with that job after high-level negotiations with the Indian Government.

Medical facilities were inadequate. There was an acute shortage of medicines. Indian hospitals were overcrowded with injured evacuees most of whom had sustained serious bullet or bayonet injuries. It was decided to build a few temporary field hospitals for our forces. The biggest hospital was later constructed in No 2 sector. Very few doctors had crossed over to India. To overcome the shortage of doctors, medical students up to 4th year education were pressed into service and put in charge of various camps and sub-sectors. Arrangements were made with the Indian Army to treat our armed forces personnel in Indian military hospitals.

Many other problems were discussed and sorted out. Some essential stores and equipment were non-existent in the sectors. We were promised timely supply of our requirements. Throughout the war we never received any supply either in time or in full quantity. This might have been due to some justified reasons. During the rains most of the troops were to be accommodated in hurriedly improvised huts which never served the purpose. We could not get sufficient tentage. A good part of the winter saw our boys shivering. There were few blankets and still fewer warm clothes. Most of the battles saw our troops barefooted. There were few jungle boots. We received a large quantity of plastic slippers suitable for use in the bathrooms and not in battlefields.

Operational capability and role of available troops in every sector were discussed in detail. The regular troops were not yet fully reorganised or trained for any comman-

mando-type action. So, deep penetration inside Bangladesh was ruled out for the time being. Instead, we decided to step up operational activities against the enemy all along the border belt. Maximum stress was given to stepping up guerrilla activities inside Bangladesh. For that a very large number of men had to be trained in insurgency activities. We had locally trained only a very limited number of FFs mainly with the help of BSF. The Indian Army chalked out an elaborate and comprehensive scheme to train a few thousand freedom fighters every month to meet our operational requirement. Thus within a few months, it was hoped, we would be in a position to keep a substantial part of the Pakistan Army engaged by the guerrillas. In the mean time, training and reorganisation of the regulars would go on in full swing until they would be fit for an offensive. The freedom fighters were given the task of disrupting the communication system, power installations, laying ambushes, raiding enemy HQs, fuel and ammunition dumps, and other supply points. The gradual process of attrition would seriously affect the enemy morale, drain away his energy and completely unnerve his troops; so that, when a bloody offensive was launched with the regulars, all enemy opposition would crumble.

That ultimately turned out to be the final strategy. The question remained who would launch that offensive and when?

For the time being, we were more interested in getting the maximum number of people trained to fight. The

training programme spread over only 2 to 3 weeks. During this period they were trained in the use of rifles, light machine-guns, hand-grenades, explosives and such minor tactics as ambushes and field-craft. The programme seemed to aim at "quantity production" rather than "quality production."

Since we were fully dependent on the Indian Army for all supplies and training, some senior Indian military officers were deputed by the Indian Government to remain in constant touch with us. These officers of the rank of brigadier were directly under the operational and administrative control of the Eastern Command of the Indian Army and were designated sector commanders. Each Indian sector commander was responsible for two or more Bangladesh sectors. It was mostly through the Indian sector commanders that we maintained our link with the Bangladesh Forces HQ as well as with the Eastern Command. All operational policies were formulated at the highest level jointly by our Forces HQ and the Eastern Command. Execution of those policies was the responsibility of the Indian and the Bangladesh sector commanders. At times, however, we used to receive contradictory orders which hindered our smooth functioning.

On July 15, we met the acting President, Syed Nazrul Islam, and the Prime Minister, Mr Tajuddin Ahmed. There was, however, no exchange of views nor any discussion on the situation in different sectors. That night there was an oath-taking ceremony. Formally we owed allegiance to the Government of Bangladesh.

Before our departure from Calcutta we learnt that some Bengali army officers had escaped from Pakistan. More were likely to follow.

While we were elated by this news, it was quite disturbing to know that there were desertions on our side as well. Although such desertions never reached an alarming proportion, news of every such act was agonising for us. Hardship, frustration and individual family problems were the main factors leading to such desertions. Then, there were the infiltrators in every camp working for the enemy. These agents returned to Bangladesh once they collected some information. We tried our best to screen them but it was a hopeless task as thousands of evacuees crossed over every day and it was not practicable to check them all.

The youth camps were the main centres of breeding frustration. Towards the end of July, I, along with Major Khaled, visited a youth camp near Agartala. There were 3,000 young men waiting for over two months for training. Hygienic condition was pitiable. Food and water supply was almost non-existent. Similar conditions prevailed in many other youth camps and frustration set in after such long waiting. The training camps, even when their number almost doubled later, could not cope with such a large number of young men.

It was very interesting to observe that no one from the refugee camps showed any willingness to come forward for training and fighting the enemy. Out of more than one lakh freedom fighters trained throughout the war,

not even one per cent came from the refugee camps. A probable explanation could be that most of those who had come to the youth camps had their families left inside Bangladesh and was only too eager tc go home immediately after training. Their sole intention in coming to India was to receive military training. Whereas those in the refugee camps had fled Bangladesh out of fear and were living there with their families. In the camps these people felt assured of at least two meagre meals for their survival. Since they had no family members left behind in Bangladesh the natural urge to return home was lacking—at least till it was absolutely safe. Who makes it safe and how was of no great importance. They wanted others to do the difficult job for them. That was the attitude in them as well as in others whom fear had driven out of Bangladesh. Their contribution to the war was nil or, at best, circumstantial and non-voluntary. The people within Bangladesh who lived in the midst of constant fear and danger and stuck to their land paid the heaviest price for freedom.

XXV A LAND OF PERPETUAL MISERY

"Information is pouring in daily about atrocities committed by the Pakistan Army in Bangladesh. In many cases, they surrounded villages and after killing and looting at will burnt down the whole area systematically. Young people were taken away to unknown places.

Most of these victims never returned." (From a page of my war diary.)

For many generations every family in Bangladesh will have a sordid tale to tell. Two hundred years of foreign domination and oppression was followed by a mockery of independence. For every generation the ultimate destiny was humiliation, deprivation and suffering. Even nature took its revenge. Epidemic, famine, flood and cyclone each took its own toll. The magnitude of human suffering can never be assessed in this land of perpetual misery.

There was no end to such suffering in sight. As the struggle for freedom became organised and intense, as the number of vultures flying in the sky started swelling, everyone realised that the months ahead had more suffering in store for them than they had experienced in decades.

The war of liberation was only a few months old. Time was passing at the slowest pace. The enemy was moving fast; from big cities to the smaller ones, then to the villages and the countryside.

Wherever the Pakistan Army moved, a trail of death and destruction was left behind. In the initial days of fighting, it was wild killing and destruction. Later, they became a little selective. (And there were 65 million Bengalis from whomt hey could select at their sweet will.)

Big cities like Dacca, Chittagong and Khulna as well as a number of smaller ones saw the worst possible plunder and loot known in civilised history.

All those were planned and organised at the highest level of the Pakistan Army. Officers and other ranks alike were only too happy when asked to carry out those orders. They too had personal interest in the whole affair and the booty was shared by all, including the divisional commanders.

Gold and jewellery, television sets, transistors, refrigerators, watches, costly electronic appliances and a wide variety of other expensive items were looted from shops owned by the Bengalis. Residential houses were looted systematically. Cash, ornaments, cars, furniture, crockery, cutlery, household appliances, even ash-trays were carried away.

All the looted items used to be collected centrally at the battalion HQs and distributed equally. Most of the regimental and services centres in West Pakistan received lots of looted items in the form of presents from respective battalions. Local brigade HQs and divisional HQs received their shares from units under command.

Ships coming from West Pakistan loaded with arms and ammunition would return with cars, furniture, television sets and other looted items.

Killing and raping were done on a competitive basis and were recognised by commanders at vaious levels as a measure of individual professional efficiency.

A new war game became very popular with certain units of the Pakistan Army—mainly amongst the officer cadre. From concentration camps they would pick up a few prisoners and take them to an open area. With hands

tied behind their backs, the victims would be asked to run. Every victim had a number on his body and each officer knew the number he had to engage. Officers would fire on respective targets once the victims reached 100 yards line. This moving target practice would continue at 200 yards and 300 yards marks. Efficiency was determined by the number of bullets fired to shoot down the target and the area of the body where the bullet pierced through. Those victims who could not be killed at long distance would be thrown on the ground and engaged at a close distance with pistol shots, aimed at one of the eyes.

With the approach of Pakistani soldiers to any area, everyone fled for life. Those who could not escape were either used as forced labour or lined up and mowed down by machine-gun fire. Selected women were picked up and taken to the harems in army camps. Young people were herded into vehicles and moved away to unknown places. And none of them returned. It was a well-known practice for the army doctors to drain away blood from young people for Pakistani battle casualties. Eastern Command HQ at Dacca had passed special instruction to all formations to eliminate the maximum number of Bengali youths. Exception was made for those who were "confirmed beyond any doubt to be loyal to the military junta." Thereby they wanted to ensure that no able-bodied youth would be available to be trained to fight for liberation of Bangladesh.

A whole nation was set on motion with the entire population moving from place to place in search of safety.

They were refugees in their own land. Their houses were set on fire. Trees were felled and standing crops burnt up to give a clear field of fire. Tin-shed houses were demolished and the material was used for construction of bunkers. Even rails were removed for the same purpose. A big floating pontoon bridge of great public utility over the river Karnaphuli was dismantled and used as bailey bridge in other areas. Hospitals, dispensaries, school and college buildings were turned into army camps. At night fall, sounds of rifle and pistol shots and agonising screams of Bengali men and women from every army camp would rend the air and travel far. Torture and killing were regular features and it is difficult to estimate how many hundreds of thousands were killed in the camps.

Killing and destruction were more widespread in the rural areas and Yahya's government employed everything for that purpose.

Battalions received a special supply of petrol for burning houses and dead bodies. There were many detachments equipped with flame-throwers and the Pakistanis made very liberal use of this equipment.

In almost every district, the air force made repeated attacks on civilian population and napalm bombs were used extensively.

Naval gunboats, cruising up and down the rivers, shelled villages on either side for as long as they had ammunition. Fishermen working in the rivers or people working

in the fields on river banks were mowed dowed by gun-boats with machine-gun fire.

Tanks, rocket launchers and recoilless rifles were used systematically to destroy Bengali homes and property. Strong constructions were blasted off with explosives.

Charitable and educational institutions, temples and mosques, hospitals, dwelling houses, shops and market places—nothing was spared by those people. But their main target was the people of Bangladesh. Even the mightiest pen would fail to depict the brutalities and atrocities committed by the armed forces of Pakistan. Those surpassed all imagination.

A few amongst the mass murderers were so horrified by their own action that they lost mental balance and were sent back to West Pakistan. A few others deserted the army and went home. It happened with a Pathan JCO of a Frontier Force regiment—now earning his livelihood by driving a taxi in Rawalpindi. Sometime in September 1971, he was driving a Bengali army major from Rawalpindi to Islamabad. En route the JCO gave the account of what he had seen in Bangladesh.

"My regiment was airlifted to East Pakistan and we were told to kill the Hindus and the Kafirs (non-believers in God). One day in June, we cordoned a village and were ordered to kill the Kafirs in that area. We found all the village women reciting the Holy Quran and the men holding special congregational prayers seeking God's mercy. But they were unlucky. Our commanding officer ordered us not to waste any time.

"A few days later we moved to a small town. This time we were ordered to gather some people and force them into looting a market. We managed to get about 200 people and ordered them to loot the market. Army cameramen were present to photograph the scene. Afterwards, all those people were taken to a field. Throughout the night they dug their own graves. Next morning, they were shot and thrown into the pits. Some of the Pathan soldiers refused to fire. They were sent back to West Pakistan.

"Two days later, we were passing through that place and found a little girl sitting by one of those mass graves. She did not move away on seeing us. Rest of the people had fled the area.

"But it was in Haluaghat area that I had the most sickening experience of my life. Believe me, Major Saheb, God will punish us for what we have done to your people. My company was ordered to clear a certain area reportedly infested with Mukti Fouz. I was to relieve a company of the Punjab Regiment that had already carried out some mopping up operation in that area.

"The first village we passed through had been completely burnt down by the Punjab Company. Most of the people had managed to escape. We found only a few bodies of old men, women and children. We passed through five other villages; the sight was almost identical. In the evening we reached the last village where my company was to relieve the one from the Punjab Regiment commanded by a young lieutenant. The officer

was resting by a pond and the troops were cleaning their rifles. Some of the bayonets still had bloodstains.

"He briefed me about the area and pointed to some distant villages where the Mukti Fouz was reportedly active.

"There were dead bodies all around. A few injured persons were groaning with pain. They were all civilians. Smoke was still rising from some of the houses. From one of those huts we heard an infant crying. Inside, there were four dead bodies, of an old man and three women. The women were naked—cut vertically through the legs. One had a breast partially cut and the child was biting at it for milk. Lieutenant saheb picked up the child and yelled at my troops, 'I throw this into the air. Who can catch it on the bayonet?'

"None of my troops came forward. They were mostly Pathans and believe me, Major Saheb, I swear by God, we did not like that scene.

"I snatched the child away and told him politely, 'Lieutenant saheb, this area is under me now. Your company should go.' To this he replied, 'Say, you people cannot do it. We haven't missed any so far.' Then he moved off with his troops.

"That very night I took the child and deserted my regiment. The child would cry quite often. I was afraid of being detected by the Mukti Fouz. So I left it in a paddy field. I do not know what happened to it; must have died there."

There were only a negligible few Bengalis who were the blessed ones—identified with the war efforts of the Pakistan Government and generally escaped tortures. They belonged to certain fanatic religious organisations. Members of these parties formed themselves into fascist groups known as 'Al-Badar' and 'Al-Shams' under direct control of Major General Rao Farman Ali, civil affairs advisor to the Governor of East Pakistan. These two groups were given the task of selective killing. The military junta wanted to kill all Bengali intellectuals and highly skilled personnel so that there was a vacuum of "intellectual leadership." Their policy of setting the Bengalis against the Bengalis succeeded to a very great extent. Members of 'Al-Badar' and 'Al-Shams' could easily identify and locate all Bengali intellectuals sympathetic towards the liberation movement. Hundreds of our doctors, engineers, educationists, thinkers and highly skilled personnel were killed by the members of these two infamous organisations. In many respects they did more harm to Bangladesh than even the Pakistanis could do.

Peace Committees were formed at various levels. Hardly 30 to 40 per cent members of these committees were perhaps ideologically linked with the concept of Pakistan. Others were forced by circumstances beyond their control to become members—mostly as a means of redemption from the Pakistanis. Their task was mainly espionage on behalf of the Pakistan Army. Besides, they were to provide all local assistance to the army and ensure implementation of the Pakistan Government's

instructions in respect of countering guerrilla warfare. This organisation could not function up to the army junta's expectation since we had a large number of active sympathisers as peace committee members and even as peace committee chairmen in some places.

Worst were the 'Razakars,' members of an armed volunteer corps—another creation of Rao Farman Ali. Although they were termed volunteer corps, only 20 to 30 per cent of the Razakars were volunteers. Every village or union was ordered by the local army authorities to produce a certain number of people to join this force. If any area failed to provide the required number, it used to be subjected to harsh acts of reprisal. Thus many unwilling and innocent people were forced by circumstances to be Razakars.

They were armed with ·303 rifles and trained as a third-line defence force. Their main task was guarding roads, bridges, railway lines and vital installations and reinforcing police posts, border outposts and even isolated regular army detachments. In their own areas they acted as guides and informers to the enemy. Although we got many of our trusted men secretly enlisted in the Razakar force, the active Razakars were a great prolem for us. At a certain stage we had to pay full attention to them; special operations had to be launched to liquidate the active ones and terrorise the others away.

XXVI 'OPERATIONS JACK POT'

On May 23, only a week after the Indian Army's taking over operational responsibility from BSF, a secret training camp was commissioned on the initiative of the Indian Navy. Located near the monument of Plassey battle on the bank of the Bhagirathi, the camp was code-named "C 2 P". Soon after, Indian naval officers moved out to different youth camps. "I want to select some good swimmers who should be young and healthy,"—I was told by the visiting naval officer. In June, the first batch of 150 volunteers was selected and moved to camp "C 2 P." By the first week of August they completed a hard and rigorous training schedule.

The entire naval effort was concentrated on destroying ships and crafts, and disrupting shipping traffic in order to paralyse the troop and other military logistics movement in Bangladesh. It was calculated that the fastest and the most economic way to achieve this aim would be to train a large number of volunteers in the technique of free swimming and handling of comparatively simple yet effective explosive charges including 'LIMPET' mines.

To that end, a special operation was to be launched with trained people. Minutest details of the operation were worked out at the naval HQ. It was planned to make direct attacks on the seaports of Chittagong and Mangla and on the river ports of Chandpur, Daudkandi, Nara-

yanganj, Ashuganj, Nagarbari, Khulna, Barisal, Goalandghat, Phulcharighat and Arichaghat. That operation was code-named "Operations Jack Pot." Final planning for execution of "Operations Jack Pot" was left to the respective sector commanders.

On July 28, I sat with Brigadier Shabeg Singh of the Indian Army commanding Delta Sector to formulate the final plan. For more than four hours we discussed details, studying maps and charts of Chittagong port and river Karnaphuli. Moon timings, meteorological conditions, tide table, wind speed and direction, speed of water current and scores of other details assumed great importance for this operation. Since May, we had been collecting information about activities in the port and had a reasonably clear picture as to what the boys were likely to encounter and where during the execution phase. Protective measures taken by the Pakistan Army and duty habits of the sentries in the port were known. At night there was no traffic in the river except for a few gunboats moving out on patrol duty at regular intervals. That posed no problems as long as we could keep our plan absolutely secret. On August 14, coinciding with the independence day of Pakistan, 60 trained boys were to swim across the Karnaphuli at night, attach Limpet mines to the maximum number of ships in the port and then swim away with the low tide, leaving behind a trail of severe destruction.

On August 10, "Operations Jack.Pot" was launched. Sixty young men selected for Chittagong port were divided into three groups. Groups 1 and 2 were to follow

the land route through Mirsharai, Sitakund and Chittagong city till they reached the final base at Charlakhya on the eastern bank of the Karnaphuli. Group 3 was to reach Charlakhya by boat. There was an overall commander of the three groups. They all carried Limpet mines, one pair of fins, one knife and some dry rations. One sten gun was given for every three men. The overall group commander was issued with a fancy and highly sensitive transistor set. The most important duty for him was to listen to every musical programme of the Calcutta centre of All India Radio religiously and attentively. If he failed, the entire mission could be in jeopardy.

They were given final briefing on August 9. All of them including the guides and the porters were told how and when to move from one place to another; where they should halt en route ; addresses of our trusted agents in every area who could give them food, safe shelter and make final arrangements for their transportation to Charlakhya.

By August 13, groups 1 and 2 had reached the last base before Charlakhya. This base was near Chittagong city. The most hazardous journey would be from that place to Charlakhya since it involved moving through Chittagong city and then crossing the river by boat.

A rumour had somehow spread that the freedom fighters would deal a severe blow to the occupation forces on August 14, the independence day of Pakistan. The enemy was on full alert. Curfew remained imposed

every night and innumerable check-posts were established. Army jeeps with mounted machine-guus patrolled the entire city. Houses were being searched again, raids conducted in different localities and everyone moving in the city was searched by the army. Groups 1 and 2 had to evade all these security measures. If even one boy was arrested from this lot, there would be no alternative but to cancel "Operations Jack Pot," planned simultaneously for a number of other ports including Mangla, Chandpur and Daudkandi.

Something more was worrying the commander. There was no news of the third group which was to follow the seacoast by boat. And while listening to the particular musical programme of Calcutta radio on August 13, he heard an old Bengali song played in the programme: "Amar putul ajke pratham jabe sasur bari." (My doll will visit the inlaws for the first time today.) The song carried a message for him and his groups and he knew there would be another song within 24 hours. After the second song he could throw away that transistor and forget about any radio programme till "Operations Jack Pot" was successful.

Freedom fighters based inside the city did an excellent job and ensured safe passage of all the boys up to Charlakhya. The Pakistan Army did not bother to check an ambulance and a pickup van of the electricity department. A boat ferried all the boys across the Karnaphuli right under the nose of the Pakistan Army. They all wore common village dress and carried baskets of fruits,

vegetables, fish, rice and salt as if returning home after shopping. Before launching them, we had paid them money for such a purchase. At the bottom of every basket was a jute sack which wrapped the Limpet mine, the fins and in some baskets the sten guns.

On August 14, the second Bengali song was played: "Ami tomay jato shunie chilam gan, tar badale chaini kono dan." (I did not ask for a return for all the songs I sang for you.)

The groups were unfortunately a day behind schedule. Except for group 3, all had assembled at Charlakhya by night. On August 14, they needed proper rest after having walked almost 80 miles. A certain reconnaissance had to be made in daylight. Every member of the team had to be shown his target, the site from where to get into the river and the suitable place where to get ashore again. So, the earliest these boys could go into operation was the next night.

However, August 14 did not end comfortably for the enemy. Throughout that night there were series of actions against them all along the border belt and in various other parts throughout Bangladesh. Our people were, however, frustrated. They had expected something big from the freedom fighters on August 14 — something that could come as a slap on the face of the enemy.

On August 15 at Charlakhya, 40 young people, mostly in their teens, had an early evening meal and went for a little sleep.

One o'clock in the morning. The city was deep asleep. The river was calm. Silently they moved fast to the river bank. Across the river, the jetties were flooded with light. Search-lights scanned the area at leisure. Sentries were tired and sleepy. For the last few days they had been kept on full alert and now they relaxed their vigilance. Big cranes cast strange shadows on the cemented platform. Sentries were used to those shades. They never had any problem from the river. Any boat or sampan trying to get alongside the ships could be detected and dealt with at long range. And that had never happened.

MV OHRMAZD arrived at Chittagong on August 14 with 9910 tons of military cargo and was berthed at Jetty 13.

MV AL-ABBAS arrived on August 9 with 10418 tons of military cargo and was berthed at Jetty 12.

A dumb barge, Orient Barge No. 6, was loaded with 276 tons of arms and ammunition. It was waiting at anchor in front of the fish harbour jetty for the towing tug to carry her to Dacca.

There were a few other ships and barges. At the naval jetty there were two gunboats and a barge. After dusk, the gunboats moved out for an unknown destination. Bad luck for the boys. Two attractive targets were gone. 1-15 am. The masters and the crew of AL-ABBAS and OHRMAZD were asleep. The watchmen and the military sentries were half asleep. At 2 am they would be relieved. Another 45 minutes to the change over.

Keeping only their heads above the water, the boys had by then swam up to their respective targets. Without wasting any time they stuck Limpet mines against the ships and swam away down the river as silently as they had approached their targets.

They swam further south and got on shore on the easten bank. There was enough time for them to move to a safe distance before daylight broke in. By morning they would be in Patiya, rest for the day and resume their journey to Harina, HQ of No. 1 sector.

1-40 am, August 16. A deafening explosion shook everything. The city trembled. People jumped out of their beds. Children started screaming.

Was it an earthquake ? None could guess what had happened.

1-45 am. Another severe explosion. Then the third, the fourth, the fifth. A series of explosions one after another. Panic spread all over. Sentries started firing in utter confusion.

Orient Barge No. 6 sank in no time to the river bottom. AL-ABBAS and OHRMAZD were sinking fast. Heavy quantities of water were getting into the hatches. Many other ships and barges were damaged but none dared to go near apprehending more explosions. Already there were casualties among the ship crew.

At day-break, senior officials rushed to the port. Curfew was imposed and helicopters started hovering over to find out the members of Mukti Fouz. As a reprisal enemy artillery indiscriminately shelled many localities

on the eastern bank. The villages close to the river were burnt down. Many innocent villagemen and fishermen were arrested on suspicion. Failing to extract any information from them, the Pakistanis became mad with rage. The arrested people were lined up on the river bank and shot down. Their bodies were thrown into the river to drift away.

At Patiya our boys were resting peacefully. They had succeeded in a mission that was dangerous and complicated. Theirs was a unique achievement not frequent in the history of insurgent operations.

At 5 am, the staff officer in the operation room of HQ, Eastern Command (Dacca), decided to break the news to the Corps Commander without waiting for full details. Chandpur and Mangla ports had also been subjected to guerrilla attacks and he had received two "OPS immediate" messages from Comilla and Jessore. Besides material damage, the guerrillas had deeply hurt the Pakistanis' vaunted vanity. 'Operations Jack Pot' was a grand success.

"From the circumstances discussed above none of the ships' personnel can be made responsible for the casualty as the same could not be foreseen and it was never thought that the guerrillas could undertake such type of operation.

"However, arrangements have been made to keep a good look-out on the river, disallowing any boat to come alongside the vessels during day or night."

(From Pakistan Army enquiry report on the incident of August 16).

The Pakistan Army was caught by surprise when such a coordinated and successful attack was made on the major ports simultaneously. True, they had never expected that the guerrillas could ever undertake such type of operation. Since June, when we started using non-conventional tactics against the enemy, operational behaviour of our boys had taken a particular pattern, to which the Pakistanis were getting used to. There were hundreds of incidents all over Bangladesh in which the FFs ambushed enemy patrol parties, small detachment or vehicular convoys and conveniently disappeared into the countryside. Throwing grenades, killing Razakars, peace committee members, known collaborarators or members of Al-Badar and Al-Shams were common daily events. At night the boys would fire a few pot shots on enemy positions or in the wilderness aiming at nothing and then retreat. The tendency was to do actions which did not involve any risk.

Nowhere till August, did the guerrillas attack any important target on their own. No attempt was made on the enemy leadership. Even top Bengali collaborators were comfortably carrying on their daily activities. A few odd, hasty and unplanned attempts were made on the lives of such people. But those failed and some of the guerrillas were apprehended and killed by the Pakistanis.

Enemy logistic areas, HQs, officers' messes, dumps, stores and important sources of power and fuel, ports, railway—all remained untouched. Very few small bridges were

damaged by guerrilla action. In June, July and August guerrillas inflicted perhaps a little more than routine casualty. Foreign radios were broadcasting negative news commentary portraying return of normalcy in Bangladesh. In the diplomatic circles Bangladesh became almost a dead issue. We had failed to create the desired impact. The rate of attrition had slowed down and the morale of our boys was at the lowest. The Pakistan army, on the other hand, was in quite a comfortable position—much better than what his position was up to the middle of June. At the early stage our regulars had inflicted heavy casualties on him. Even a most sober estimate after verification from various sources would put the figure between 5,000 and 6,000 dead and 8,000 to 10,000 enemy soldiers injured; at least one third of whom were physically disabled and unfit for military service.

Although guerrilla activities were very unsatisfactory, we were optimistic of a better future. The boys had only 2 to 3 weeks' training on absolutely conventional tactics and indside Bangladesh they were to adopt purely guerrilla tactics. They were all young, emotional and over-ambitious and everyone demanded to be made a group leader or some such thing. We could expect nothing better until the outlook of our fighting men changed. That could, however, be achieved only by motivation and not by any other means.

Successful execution of 'Operations Jack Pot' made it clear to us that given proper guidance and leadership

our boys could achieve miracles. They were all sincere and intelligent and ready to grasp any situation quickly. Their mental calibre was undoubtedly superior to that of the illiterate Pakistani soldiers. We were gifted with the largest educated guerrilla force.

The entire war strategy was given another rethinking. Besides giving detailed and exhaustive briefing to each group (normally 8 to 10 FFs) we decided to launch special groups to strike at vital targets. Operational plan for every group was made at sector HQs. Only minor adjustments were left to the group commanders as would be dictated by spot situation in the target areas. But we were unable to provide leadership to the guerrilla groups. No military commander, or for that matter none, has means to produce leaders. Suitable people were there but they were beyond our control and reach.

Disappearance of persons, deemed fit for section or platoon leadership amongst the guerrilla groups, was detected as early as in June. Selected people in the youth camps received secret instruction to assemble at some rendezvous (RK) camps wherefrom they were moved away under the supervision of a particular intelligence organisation. Arrangements were so elaborate that even special flights were arranged for their transportation with utmost secrecy. Similar elaborate arrangemenrs were made after their training till they were finally launched inside Bangladesh. And all this was kept hidden from us, the sector commanders, in whose areas these people were to operate.

We tried to stop this putting forward a number of arguments. (a) Since the boys would be operating in our areas, our own operational plans were likely to be jeopardised unless plans of those special groups were coordinated. For example, there were certain areas where we did not want to do any action. Being safe bases for hundreds of our guerrillas, we wanted to keep those areas undisturbed by the enemy and purposely refrained from any action. These special groups had no knowledge of this and they carried out some operations. Immediately, the Pakistanis went for combing operations and all our boys had to leave those areas. (b) Creating a special force with our best material would leave the commanders with a vacuum of leadership and the entire guerrilla warfare was bound to suffer a serious set-back. Would any government create a special force of, say, two companies by concentrating all officers of a division in that force (since the officer cadre is supposed to be the best material) and leave all the battalions in the hands of subedar majors and havildar majors ? That exactly was happening with our guerrilla force and all the sector commanders were bitter about it. Worst of all, since we were not taken into confidence we felt that we were not being trusted by the authorities. Our efforts to stop it failed and we were told in a clear and cold manner, "That's none of your business."

That was the business of the cabinet division of the central government of India. It turned out that this scheme was drawn up by the Research and Analysis

Wing (RAW) of the cabinet division and had the blessings of the highest authorities in India.

The scheme was code-named RAW and those recruited under it received special training, facilities, special arms and equipment, including sophisticated communication sets which we had not even seen. That was the RAW fiasco—a disastrous political decision; a sickening and horrifying scheme that created serious misunderstanding amongst the fighting forces during the liberation war and is likely to have far-reaching effects on our social and political life for many years to come.

There was, however, no doubt in our mind that these 'special boys' were sincere and dedicated to the cause of freedom. Their patriotism was unquestionable. As a matter of fact, they were the hard core of the Bengali nationalist movement, imbued with the noble ideal of the country above all. Our objection was only to the possibility of the scheme being misused. Our intention was that this patriotic intelligent force should be properly utilised in the national interest and for no other purpose.

Adoption of such a scheme was necessitated, it was understood, by some overriding political considerations. Many trained leftist workers had been inducted into Bangladesh by their respective organisations and had established operational bases. It was also rumoured that left-wing political parties of Bangladesh had started training a large number of their workers secretly in collaboration with the leftist organisations of India.

This caused considerable alarm in the right-wing political circles of Bangladesh, more so in the official Indian circles. This was evident from the fact that the RAW scheme was over-enthusiastically sponsored and nourished by the Government of India. What was more surprising was that not only we, the army people, were kept ignorant about the scheme but even Mr Tajuddin, Prime Minister of the Provisional Government of Bangladesh, had very little or no initial knowledge of it. The whole thing looked like a 'palace intrigue' which perhaps it was not.

The likely aims of the scheme were :

(a) to counter the efforts of the left-wing organisations to gain any foothold in Bangladesh; and

(b) to retain power in favour of a right-wing ('pro') government after liberation.

Thus the scheme opened a new front against an invisible and imaginary enemy. The eternal tussle for power and political supremacy had begun. Did the planners of the scheme fail to understand that the conflict of political ideology did not interest our people? They merely longed for freedom from ruthless oppression and suffering. All efforts should have, therefore, been diverted to fulfil that desire of the people. Tragically, post-war consideration gained paramount importance and vast human resources were misused.

On August 29 a high-level conference was held to thrash out once for all some of these disputed issues. It was

learnt that Mr D. P. Dhar represented the Indian government at that conference.

Most of the problems faced by the Bangladesh forces were discussed and decisions taken. A heated discussion took place over the issue of special RAW groups which seemed not to have the blessings of Mr Tajuddin. Mr D. P. Dhar in his shrewd diplomatic manner evaded any serious discussion on it. "It is unfortunate," he tried to impress, "that there should be any misunderstanding about the special groups. They are your boys fighting for the same cause of liberation. We are simply training them for specialised jobs." Till the end there was no happy reconciliation on this issue. However, the Bangladesh Government agreed to the amendment that the sector commanders would be informed as and when the special group boys were inducted. This was a diplomatic victory for Mr D. P. Dhar, since the acceptance of the amendment implied recognition of the special group by the Bangladesh Government.

The Indian stand vis-a-vis the Bangladesh issue was clearly spelled out in this conference. A long-drawn-out war of attrition was bound to affect the Indian economy more seriously than the economy of Pakistan. Although India had faced refugee problems at other times also this one was different and a poor country like India could not afford to bear the burden for long.

On the other hand, to give the devil its due, the Pakistan Army was supposed to be one of the best fighting forces of the world. Through guerrilla warfare, however

long-drawn-out it might be, such a regular force could not be expected to be wiped out. A few thousand casualties would mean nothing to Pakistan since it had a ready stock of suitable manpower. The casualties could always be sacrificed, conveniently and without any political hazard, in the name of Allah and Islam.

Most important was the interest of some superpowers in the integrity of Pakistan. Someone wanted a route to the sea through that land, someone wanted a military base and so on. They assured the Pakistan Government of their full support—moral as well as material. Thus, Pakistan started receiving huge supplies of military hardware to replace their war losses and even raised new divisions. It is interesting that some superpowers did not want to lose the sympathy of the Bengalis either. Someone made a very apt remark on the role of these big powers: "They are supplying Pakistan with weapons to inflict injuries on the Bengalis. And they are—at the same time—supplying the Bengalis with the ointment to be applied on the wounds."

Keeping in view the indifference of the big powers to the vast human sufferings, it was understood that 'India would have to act on its own'. That final moment remained secret from all—though it was rumoured that an armed intervention was likely latest by April 72.

From tactical considerations, winter was the most likely season when all the passes in the Himalayan ranges would remain snow-covered to thwart any Chinese intervention. And in Bangladesh, rains would stop,

the ground become dry and sufficiently hard for cross-country movement of tanks and other vehicles, as well as for swift and fast manoeuvreability.

Decision was taken to train and induct 20,000 guerrillas every month beginning from September. By December 71, there would be more than one lakh guerrillas in Bangladesh. Even if only 30 per cent of them were properly activated that would sufficiently off-balance the Pakistan Army and tie down one third of the enemy in counter-insurgency operations. Would that be the opportune moment for a decisive action ? Anyhow, with every passing day, India and Pakistan were getting closer to an inevitable war.

XXVII HARD PRESSED

Intensive preparations were afoot in India since September. Divisional and corps HQs moved forward. Vast logistic and supply networks were established on war-footing. Maintenance and repairs of all roads and bridges leading to the likely future combat zones were taken over by the Indian Army. Some units moved to their battle locations near the border and extensive reconnaissance, including ground and terrain analysis, was undertaken.

We were pouring hundreds of trained boys every day into Bangladesh but were unable to achieve any significant result. Lack of leadership at all levels continued to be the main cause. As a result, effective control could not

be exercised and we were lagging behind in our efforts to step up guerrilla activities. A half-hearted attempt was made, mainly on political considerations, to fill this vacuum by training some energetic MCAs (Members of the Constituent Assembly). The scheme failed because very few MCAs were trained and still fewer were inducted.

As the entire Indian subcontinent gradually moved to the arena of a bloody armed conflict, we the sector commanders came under tremendous pressure to step up operational activities. The enemy was to be 'bled white', sufficiently disorganised and weakened so that he was in no position to bear the brunt of a decisive armed offensive. This broad operational aim was to be achieved within the shortest possible time by the end of November, at the latest.

The task seemed to be beyond our operational capability—considering the time limit imposed and the resources available with us. For example, No 1. sector comprised all areas east of Muhuri river, i.e., the whole of Chittagong and the Chittagong Hill Tracts districts. Enemy strength in this sector was a little less than two brigades, spread over an active frontage of more than 50 miles. Besides, there were at least two paramilitary battalions brought from West Pakistan. I had just about two battalions of EPR, Police and some left-over army personnel with only four army and two air force officers to command the entire sector as against a minimum of 100 officers in the opposite camp. The sector was divided into five sub-sectors each commanded

by an officer or a JCO who had very little experience of the intricate problems of command and control.

The most hard-pressed was the sector HQ where I had only one staff officer to look after all administrative and supply arrangements. This was a killing job demanding work for 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The staff officer ultimately suffered a serious nervous breakdown. But he had to resume his duty after only a few days in hospital. There was no alternative.

Our supply base was at Agartala, 100 miles away from Harina. Ration, fuel, tentage, clothing, arms and ammunition, medicine and everything else had to be brought from Agartala for 3000 men. The same vehicles would then carry supplies to every sub-sector through difficult hill terrain. During the rainy season we exhausted all our energy to keep the supply system functioning. Every time a vehicle skidded off the track or got bogged down in knee-deep mud, an officer had to stand there till the vehicle was pulled out or the supplies sent to the destination by headloads.

More frustrating and time-consuming was the paperwork thrust on all of us. Bangladesh Forces HQ and the Indian Sector HQ both demanded separate reports and returns for every item, every action, in duplicate, triplicate and so on nicely typed and without any mistake. There were times when for days together we had to prepare reports—leaving all operations in a standstill and the troops slumbering. If a galaxy of officers were available, such paperwork could have been properly

distributed without overtaxing anyone or affecting the battle. But with only two officers at the sector HQ of whom the commanding officer running from one sub-sector to another and the administrative officer running for supplies, this luxurious paperwork at times annoyed us terribly. But we had to keep mum. Our supplies could be stopped without those reports. There were scores of those reports with hundreds of pages to be typed, checked and signed.

Administrative and operational control over the guerrilla forces was a still more difficult job. Hundreds of them arrived at my HQ regularly for induction. They were to be grouped areawise and briefed on their job. Every group briefing took a minimum of an hour. Briefing of special groups took a longer time. Every group needed arms and ammunition and some money for their journey. Up-to-date information had to be collected about enemy patrols and defences, which were never static, to decide on safe routes of induction. Guides were detailed to take the groups through safe routes up to the closest safe bases (usually within 8-10 miles of the border belt). Contacts at the bases were to be alerted in advance to receive the new arrivals, arrange for their food, shelter and guide them to the next base. Vehicles were needed to carry those people close to the launching area with great care so that the enemy was not alerted. Detailed records of names and addresses, route, base, arms and ammunition, clothing, ration, payment of money etc. were to be maintained for each group. After their induction we had to keep in touch with every

group, exercise control over them and ensure that they carry out their stipulated task. The groups were to send safe arrival reports, reports on any action carried out or on any information about the enemy. We had three wireless sets at different points in the sector through which we used to receive regular information from Bangladesh. Besides, a vast network of couriers was established. The couriers collected reports from a number of groups and came to sector HQ. On their return they acted as guides to other groups and this cyclic movement was a continuous process. It was an exhaustive job to keep everything moving.

What was agonising and heart-breaking was that no one at the higher echelon was even willing to recognise our difficulties and hardship. Our officers and men felt neglected and were resentful. They were subjected only to tremendous pressure for more and more actions against the enemy without a word of praise or appreciation.

At Demagiri, a place in the extreme north of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, a few hundred boys were waiting for months to be trained. Some of them died of fever and blood dysentery. Others starved for days and weeks together. Frustrated and disheartened, many returned home only to join the Razakar force. These boys had walked more than a hundred miles through unfriendly and difficult hill terrain covered with thick jungles only to join the ranks of freedom fighters. But no one showed any sincere interest in them nor did anyone appreciate the noble mission that drove them away from home.

However, there was no dearth of time for criticism and fault finding. There were confidential letters written by the top brasses on both sides that 'Bangladesh sector commanders are not acting straight'. Indian officers were perhaps justified in their contention. So were we. There was little scope for us even to pretend acting straight.

India was supplying arms and ammunition only for 50 per cent of the guerrillas to be inducted (90 per cent at a later date). We had either to induct the rest of the boys without arms or detain them. The Bangladesh Forces HQ issued clear instruction not to induct anyone without arms. The only alternative was to induct one batch with the supplies meant for two batches. Even weapons of regular soldiers not committed to the battle were issued to the guerrillas. Still, about 30 to 40 per cent from every batch had to be held back for want of supplies. This created a serious backlog for which India would not give us ration. We made local arrangements that all officers, JCOs and other ranks pay a monthly subscription to cater for the extra mouths to be fed. All this was irregular but was necessitated by circumstances beyond our control. Our intentions were misinterpreted and we were criticised. The fact remained that contradictory orders from two HQs left us bewildered and helpless.

XXVIII THE GUERRILLAS

Since August, I was under pressure to make arrangements to damage the Kaptai hydro-electric project and the only oil refinery near Chittagong Port. Whether we were capable of doing any damage or not may be a debatable issue in view of the elaborate protective arrangements made by the enemy. But the proposals were rejected outright on some other ground. Any damage or destruction of these vital installations would hurt our people more than the enemy. We favoured destruction of power transformers and electric pylons between Kaptai and Chittagong. And, instead of the oil refinery, we preferred to destroy the oil storage dumps. A special type of weapon, not available to us at the time, was needed for this.

On September 11,Flight Lt Sultan moved out of Harina with a specially trained group of guerrillas which included some regular soldiers as well. His tasks were to (a) destroy Madnaghat power substation; (b) destroy maximum number of electric pylons between Kaptai and Chittagong ; and (c) make a spot assessment of the reasons for diminishing guerrilla activities.

On October 3, the officer led his party in a daring raid and destroyed the transformer at Madnaghat, a few miles away from the city. Many electric pylons were destroyed. This completely disrupted the power supply from Kaptai. Madnaghat was well protected by high

walls and barbed wire fencing defended by a platoon of 10 regular and 20 paramilitary men. This action coming in the wake of the daring attack on the port in mid-August completely unnerved the enemy. They realised the guerrillas were becoming a force to be reckoned with.

The officer contacted most of the guerrilla groups in that area and discussed with them their problems and difficulties. On October 11, he returned to Harina and submitted a detailed report.

Guerrillas had gained a reasonable foothold in the countryside. As a matter of fact, the whole country was a vast guerrilla base from where the boys could operate at any time and in any direction. The nights were exclusively theirs and Pakistani soldiers dared not move out during those hours.

There was tremendous public support. People felt honoured and proud if they could come to any help of the guerrillas. Many people were killed by the enemy for giving food and shelter to our boys. Their houses were burnt and property was looted or given away to the Razakars and the collaborators as an incentive. Even then, the people eagerly waited to welcome the Mukti Fouz. Their hearts welled up with joy and emotion on seeing those teenagers, stooping under the load of weapon and ammunition, making steady and graceful strides over the land—ready to pounch on the enemy at any moment. Without the sacrifices of the people who stayed in Bangladesh and suffered, the liberation movement would have died a natural, painful and early death.

But weakness and inactivity of our guerrillas seriously affected the morale of the people to whom every guerrilla action, however insignificant it might be, was a step closer to freedom.

This inactivity could be attributed to many factors. Lack of leadership was one. Then there was the fear of the unknown, at times unfounded and unjustified. There was also a fear of reprisal against the innocent populace by the enemy. This put a moral embargo on the guerrilla groups. They faltered before venturing on any operation against the Pakistanis. Worst of all, the guerrillas developed a peculiar attachment to their weapons and ammunition. Those were their prized possession and they were reluctant to use any ammunition as they were not sure of any replenishment. Lastly, enemy forces were evenly dispersed throughout the countryside. They were fully mobile and all connected through a very efficient communication system. The enemy had the capability of mobilising strong forces quickly to carry out mopping up operations over wide areas.

XXIX EDGE OF A PRECIPICE

There were foreign experts in Dacca secretly training selected Pakistani officers and soldiers on the line of the American 'green berets' whose acts of bestiality horrified the whole world. Another foreign organisation worked round the clock to create rift within the ruling

party and to provoke communal riots in India, specially in the youth camps and the refugee camps. In the camps they spread rumours detrimental to the cause of Bangladesh.

Such were the odds confronting us—neither accounted for nor absolutely unexpected. The whole nation had suffered and there could be no question whatsoever of any reconciliation with those whose hands were smeared with the blood of our people. We were all standing on the edge of a precipice. Freedom was in sight, in the horizon of not-too-distant a future—hazy, almost like a shadow, yet conspicuous by its presence.

Nothing but our own inactivity could deter us from reaching that cherished goal. Nothing but our own inner conflicts and doubts could obscure from our vision that not-too-distant objective—freedom. A time had come for us to go all out for the enemy by fully activising the guerrillas as well as the sector troops and other regular battalions. It was decided to snatch away pieces of land having tactical importance and capture lightly-held border outposts of the enemy. Artillery fire support for such operations was to be provided for by the Indian Army. Besides the capture of some land and outposts, there were other important objectives behind this decision. These were :

(a) To assess battle efficiency and weaknesses of our troops.

(b) To make it known to all that we meant business and were determined to grab more and more

territory. This would force the enemy to divert his main strength in defensive role leaving very little for counter-insurgency role. Thus, tying down the enemy along the border, we wanted to ease the pressure on our guerrillas and allow them freedom of action in the interior.

(c) To ascertain the enemy's state of preparedness, the nature and extent of his defences and his capability to defend.

As we stepped up our activities along the border belt more and more Pakistani troops were being concentrated along the periphery leaving wider areas in Bangladesh unguarded. This off-balanced enemy's numerical superiority inside Bangladesh vis-a-vis our guerrillas and created an opportunity for our boys to carry out their tasks more conveniently. However, deployment of large enemy forces along the border made induction of newly trained boys much more risky and difficult. Most of the infiltration routes were closed.

On September 22, the first attempt was made to capture Champaknagar outpost and a dominating ground at Ballavpur on the main highway. Pre-attack fire support to soften and neutralise the target areas was given by the Indian artillery.

After six hours of fighting we were forced to pull back our troops. Artillery fire failed to soften the target area. The enemy was well dug-in with very strong overhead covers. Every defence post was self-sufficient for a number of days with enough supplies stored under-

ground. Every post was connected by deep communication trenches. And he had more automatic weapons than we had estimated.

On our side there were no means to control the battle. The company attacking Champaknagar was commanded by Capt Mahfuz, a young officer who displayed courage and bravery on many occasions. The company was pinned down by heavy firing from automatic weapons. Some enemy posts were causing serious interference and Mahfuz wanted those to be engaged by artillery fire. Since the only wireless set had gone out of order he had to send a soldier with the message for fire support. In the process four hours had elapsed. By then enemy reinforcements had arrived at Champaknagar.

In Ballavpur area, the company commander halted at the start. Two of his platoons had gone wide of their objectives and he had no wireless set to contact his platoon commanders. He sent messengers to trace out the platoons. It was too late when they were traced. Daylight had broken out. Artillery observer of the enemy detected our troops and started engaging them.

Although unsuccessful in our first attempt, we found that our troops had attained required fighting efficiency. With proper planning and reasonable resources, the chances of success were now brighter. The war was six months old.

Meanwhile, some important developments took place which indirectly added a new dimension and force to the liberation war. India and the Soviet Union signed

a joint defence treaty pledging to stand by each other in times of crisis and external threat.

Mrs Gandhi's successful trip to Moscow in September clearly indicated that India was no longer isolated in her stand on Bangladesh. India had so far been acting cautiously and with a good deal of restraint. Now she could go all out to help us in every possible manner. Extensive war preparations were afoot on both sides. The guerrillas sprang to life. Disruption of road and rail communication became a daily routine. Raids and ambushes were taking place even in broad daylight. Artillery duel between the Indians and the Pakistanis eased the tension of lull. Life was assuming a war-time 'norm'. On September 28, training of Bangladesh pilots started at Dimapur in Nagaland. The nucleus of a naval force for Bangladesh was also created at about the same time with 45 navy personnel who had defected from the Pakistan Navy. Two vessels, MV PALASH and MV PADMA, belonging to the port commissioner of Calcutta were taken over in September and modifications were carried out at an approximate cost of 38 lakh rupees to suit operational requirements. Each vessel was fitted with two 40-mm guns (L-60). By October the vessels were ready for operation. Under the code name 'Operation Hot Pants', these were assigned the tasks of

(a) engagement of crafts and vessels in Khulna and Mangla areas ; and

(b) mining the approaches to the Passur river.

XXX A LUNATIC BADLY HURT

From October, we started receiving encouraging reports about guerrilla activities. But the flow of maritime trade to and from the ports of Bangladesh and its subsequent distribution to the hinterland continued, successful attacks by the naval frogmen notwithstanding. An analysis showed the following main reasons :

(a) Lucrative compensation offered by the Pakistan Government to the foreign shipping companies.

(b) Introduction of convoy system on internal trade routes with armed protection.

(c) Increased gunboat activities in guarding the coastal areas and maritime ports.

(d) Technique of naval commandos had been known to the enemy who made enough protective arrangements.

As a counter-measure we decided to induct more naval commandos and adopt the following technique :

(a) induction of naval commandos on board the IWT ships as crew ;

(b) direct attacks on such convoys from the river banks and the coast with suitable long range weapon ; and

(c) conventional direct attack technique with Limpet mines taking advantage of seasonal dusk and dawn mist encountered in Bangladesh.

On October 12, Yahya Khan addressed his nation and urged the people in the name of Allah and Islam to stand solidly behind him at the gravest moment of national life. In a grave, sullen and drunken voice, he spoke of

(a) heavy military build-up by India all along the borders of Pakistan ;

(b) concentration of tanks, artillery units and airforce closer to the Pakistan borders ("why all this ?" he asked his people) ; and

(c) actions by naval frogmen in the ports of Chittagong and Mangla, destruction of roads, railways and bridges and disruption of power supplies.

Yayha's speech was significant for other reasons. Although he blamed India for everything, carefully avoiding any mention of the liberation forces, it was clear that he was looking for an excuse to start a war. His speech was just a prelude. He had confessed that the whole situation was grave. It was evident that the lunatic had been badly hurt by the liberation forces. We were prepared to hit him harder.

An attack on the fuel storage dumps in Chittagong port area had been planned as early as in July. A special group had been selected and trained separately for the attack. Till the middle of October we awaited the supply of specific weapon and ammunition for the job. The main attraction were the dumps containing highly inflammable aviation fuel for Pakistani aircraft. On October

16, the group was inducted under the leadership of Mr Mosharraf Hussain, a member of the Constituent Assembly. A night before the attack, the presence of the special group in the city became known to the enemy. Their hideout in the city was surrounded by the Pakistanis. Luckily the entire group managed to escape through a drain. But they lost their arms. The attack was postponed indefinitely.

Yahya Khan looked forward to a pretext justifying an attack on India, wherein he hoped to create a serious international crisis to divert world attention from the Bangladesh issue. His army commanders were preparing the ground for such a war. Speaking at a gathering at Saidpur in the 3rd week of October Lt General Niazi, commander, Eastern Command (Pakistan), declared that the next war would be fought on Indian soil on both the fronts. This could have passed off as an irresponsible statement as even Yahya Khan had not talked openly about a war. But that was not so. In a bid to escalate the war, the Pakistan artillery shelled Kamalpur, a village 5 miles within Indian territory on October 20 and 22. As a result, many civilians were killed and injured. Next day on October 23, the Pakistan Army in the western front started moving to their battle locations.

On October 23, Mrs Indira Gandhi went on a three-week tour of a number of western countries including the United States. She made her best efforts to impress upon the world leaders the seriousness of the whole situation and that there could be no peace in the sub-

continent till the Pakistan Government acceded to and honoured the verdict of the people of Bangladesh.

It seemed the big powers had taken those bitter pills of 'balance of power' and 'global strategy' which blackened their mind and blinded their vision. How could the sufferings of non-white Asians have any effect on them and draw their sympathy ? They were feeding Pakistan with everything in their own interest. They found nothing wrong with that foster child. No pressure was put on Yahya Khan to stop the genocide.

Pakistan's survival was at the mercy of those powers and they could have exerted decisive pressure on her if they wanted to. On the contrary, Yahya was getting bolder every day, as if gathering a brutal strength from some invisible source. Yahya had also started a fake trial against Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

A disillusioned Mrs Gandhi returned home. All her attempts at a peaceful political settlement had apparently failed. She was left with the last and most unpleasant decision.

XXXI UNDECLARED WAR BEGINS

The City of ST ALBANS, a British ship, sailed down the Hoogly and turned towards Chalna. The weather was fine and there was nothing to worry the ship's captain or the crew. Earlier, the liberation forces had warned all ships to remain away from Bangladesh ports, failing

which these were likely to be damaged or sunk by the guerrillas. This was to ensure that the Pakistan Government did not get enough vessels to carry supplies for its troops in Bangladesh or to earn any foreign exchange by sending Bangladesh jute, tea and other items overseas. It was past midnight and a Mukti Fouz gunboat was closing in on the ship. At 1-30 am, the City of ST ALBANS was under attack. The crew later confessed that 'for ten minutes it was absolute hell'. She turned her tail and limped her way back to the port of Calcutta.

SS LIGHTNING, another foreign ship, was damaged by Limpet mines on the night of August 16-17 at Mangla. She was rescued only to be attacked again in November and sunk.

Till November, 860 trained naval commandos were launched. They had damaged or sunk many coasters, tankers, tugs, barges and big ships all over Bangladesh. Eight buoys on the main navigational channel were destroyed. This seriously hampered day navigation and completely closed the channel during night. MF gunboats had laid enough mines on the entrance to the Passur river. Total damage to the enemy due to all naval actions of Mukti Fouz was estimated at well over 40 crore rupees.

By November, India had deployed a force of about 3 corps totalling seven infantry divisions. An airbase at Kumbhigram had been activated and Indian Navy's 'eastern fleet' was made operational. Broad plans were finalised to meet any aggression.

The Indian Army was fully prepared to retaliate on the eastern front. A plan was made at that time to capture the entire Belonia bulge with the help of the Indian Army. Similar big operations were planned in other sectors as well. For Belonia, D-Day was November 5.

A mishap on November 4 terribly upset all of us. Captain Shamsul Huda, one of my sub-sector commanders, who was to command three campanies for Belonia operations, died at 8-30 pm. A brave fighter, he was loved by all his troops and greatly admired. I personally saw him on many occasions moving in the extreme forward areas fearlessly. Now the same officer lay dead in his own camp in a pool of blood, his skull shattered and pieces of flesh and bones strewn all over. Only a few minutes before he had talked to the troops and given final instructions for the next day. He had received some bad news from home. For months together we were all fighting through uncertainty—uncertainty that was frustrating and depressing. No one was allowed to discuss his home or family affairs in my sector. Although a very crude and uncivilised order, this was to ensure that the troops did not discuss any matter likely to have adverse emotional effects on them. Unfortunately at 8-25 on Nov 4, Capt Shamsul Huda decided to sit on his bed (a few bamboo pieces joined together and upheld by bamboo poles) and think. A terrible depression had possessed him. Involuntarily he picked up his sten gun, put the barrel against his chin and let go.

I was discussing Belonia operations with the Indian brigade commander supporting my operations when I got the news. For some time we just could not believe this. But then we had to adjust ourselves to the tragic reality and decided to go ahead with our original plan as scheduled.

Pakistan's total strength in Belonia was two battalions of infantry and militia. One battalion was deployed in the northern half and the other in the southern half. They were well dug-in with protective minefields. Any conventional attack would be suicidal and extremely costly in terms of human lives. The plan was to penetrate somewhere through a gap in enemy defences at night and get well dug-in before daylight. The enemy at the northern portion would be isolated and cut off from receiving any supplies or reinforcements. They would thus be forced either to surrender or be gradually annihilated in a few days.

The night was dark and cold. A long column of troops moved forward. It started raining. With that came a strong wind making us shiver to the bones. Biting our lips we moved from east to west through the bulge. Bad weather came as a blessing in disguise. There were no enemy patrols anywhere nor did the enemy expect an attack that night. The noise of our movement as well as of digging the trenches was covered by the crying of the wind. By next morning all the companies had reached their positions and were well dug-in in their defences. We were almost frozen. Rains stopped and, like a gift from God, a blazing sun came up the sky.

Manpower was immediately mobilised from nearby refugee camps and villages to carry our defence stores, ammunition, food and other supplies. A 4-mile road had to be made through the hills and the paddy fields to enable our vehicles to move forward. Thousands of people voluntarily worked day and night. On the 3rd day, most of our vehicles could pass through. Response from the civilians was unique. A college professor carried a headload of C. I. sheets for our bunkers from a distance of 4 miles. Then he literally ran back to bring more. A boy of 6 years burst into tears when he was told that he was too young to carry any load.

The reaction of the enemy was slow. At first he took it for another ambush laid by the Mukti Fouz. A company was sent to clear the area we had occupied. The mistake cost him 29 lives. The rest of them withdrew, leaving the dead behind. Next day, Nov 7, two Sabre jets strafed our defences for the whole day. Only one civilian carrying some C.I. sheets for us was killed owing to strafing. Surprisingly, the enemy did not launch any determined counter-attack. It was clear he was on the defensive. There was no attempt to extricate encircled troops in the northern half. An intercepted wireless message read like this: "Make your own arrangements to escape from Belonia."

A few tried to escape through our defences. They were killed. The rest were eliminated by Nov 11.

From the prisoners of war we could assess the plight of the Pakistan Army. The soldiers complained that their

officers never stayed with them in the front line. They were short of all supplies except for ammunition. They bitterly complained: "Even for our food, we were told to make our own arrangements." Undespatched letters found in the possession of POWs or enemy dead in every sector revealed degeneration and complete breakdown of discipline in the rank and file of the Pakistan Army. That was the achievement after months of vandalism, debauchery and horrible crimes. One letter from a sepoy to his father in West Pakistan read : "Last month I sent eleven hundred rupees by money order. Hope you got it. For the last two days we were moving to some unknown place. Yesterday we were attacked by the Mukti Fouz. Two from my platoon died. Earlier, one died in a canal. It rains too much. Everywhere there are big rivers and ponds. People do not come to us. They are very afraid. We take our food from the villages and do not have to pay. Our officers also don't pay. We are resting in a village. Tomorrow morning we will move again. We do not move at night. There are many Mukti Fouz. I have applied for transfer to West Pakistan. Please pray for me—." Next morning they were ambushed and the platoon lost ten more men. One of them had this undespatched letter on his person.

From the day the Belonia operations started the Indians got directly involved in the war, although limited in scale and localised by nature. From November 5, the undeclared war between India and Pakistan started.

XXXII A BALANCE TILTED AGAINST PAKISTAN

By the third week of November we had driven the enemy out of Belonia bulge. Pakistan radio, however, was still claiming their hold on Belonia. While such claims were being made by Pakistan, its troops were actually thinning out even from Feni—an important communication centre on the Chittagong-Dacca road.

On November 21, an AP correspondent cabled from Dacca : "Pakistan Army and Mukti Fouz are locked in a grim struggle sapping the army's ability to fight the Indians if the two armies start an all-out war." By then, Dacca, Chittagong and many other cities had been rocked by repeated explosions.

As many as seven police stations had been attacked and captured by the Mukti Fouz. Power supply remained disrupted most of the time. Ports remained idle. Industrial workers started leaving for home. Vast countryside came under full control of the Mukti Fouz who set up their own administration and started trials of Razakars and collaborators.

The gathering momentum of the Mukti Fouz operations unnerved both Yahya Khan and Niazi. Not only were they losing territory and suffering heavy losses, they were also becoming apprehensive of the fact that East Pakistan might be lost very soon and with that they would lose some of the best divisions of the Pakistan Army.

Meanwhile, Pakistan committed a number of air violations on the western front. And in the eastern front, a positive step towards escalation was taken by General Niazi at Boyra, an Indian village near Ranaghat in West Bengal. On November 21, Pakistani troops supported by tanks, artillery and airforce launched an offensive in this area. A few Indian troops suffered casualties and many civilians were either killed or injured. Niazi was trying to keep to his word and had obviously sought permission from Yahya to enter Indian territory with the excuse of pursuing the Mukti Fouz. That was disastrous for him. The Indian Army mounted a counter-attack and threw the enemy back. Pakistan lost 13 Chaffee tanks and three Sabre jets. Two Pakistani pilots were captured.

Mrs Gandhi remained calm in the face of all such provocations. Loss of civilian (Indian) lives due to artillery shelling and Mrs Gandhi's outwardly soft attitude towards Pakistan created resentment in certain political circles in India. She was, however, hoping that good sense would ultimately prevail on the big powers and that they would take some concrete steps to persuade Yahya Khan to behave.

On November 22, Pakistan lodged a complaint with the United Nations that 12 Indian divisions had attacked East Pakistan in 4 sectors. The same day Yahya proclaimed emergency throughout Pakistan. Three days later, on November 25, speaking at a banquet held in honour of a visiting high-power Chinese delegation, Yahya

Khan professed: "In ten days' time, I may not be here. I may be off fighting a war."

On November 27, Pakistan artillery heavily shelled Balurghat, an Indian town in West Dinajpur.

Under cover of an artillery barrage, a brigade attack was launched by Pakistan on Indian position at Hilli with tanks and infantry. The first attack in which Pakistan lost 80 soldiers and 4 tanks was beaten off. Another assault was repulsed next day in which three tanks were captured and many Pakistanis were killed. Indians also suffered heavily. Then the Indian Army retaliated. They crossed the international boundary and advanced a few miles within Bangladesh. The Indian Government had earlier allowed its army to undertake limited offensives along the border and to penetrate so much deep into Bangladesh as would be tactically required to eliminate any threat to India's integrity. India was fully prepared not only to defend all her borders but also to retaliate with force, if needed.

The situation had by then reached an explosive stage and President Nixon put forward a proposal to India and Pakistan asking both to pull out their troops from the borders. Yahya Khan apparently agreed to that proposal. India agreed on the condition that Pakistan must pull out its troops from Bangladesh. The root cause of the whole trouble was Pakistan Army's action in Bangladesh and unless they were pulled out, there could be no peace in the region. While such proposals were being floated the most significant movement of

the Pakistan Army on the western front took place under cover of darkness on the first two nights of December. On December 2, the Pakistani artillery started shellingt he thickly populated Indian town Agartala in a desperate bid to escalate the war. On the same day, speaking at a meeting of Congress workers in Delhi, Mrs Gandhi declared: "Today, we will do what is best in our interest and not what these so-called big nations would like us to do."

War preparations by Pakistan were first observed in October in Poonch sector of Jammu and Kashmir. In view of that development, combined with the deteriorating situation in Bangladesh and sad indifference of big powers towards the tragic plight of millions of Bengalis, the Indian Government issued operational directive to its armed forces to remain prepared "in case—." Mrs Gandhi could not ignore the fact that "India had thrice been attacked by Pakistan".

What Yayha Khan aimed at was perhaps grabbing a vital chunk of Indian territory, preferably in the Jammu and Kashmir sector, and then be in a bargaining position to cater for any loss in the east.

This was to be achieved by an offensive action in the west while General Niazi was to adopt a posture of defence. The Indian Army, on the other hand, was to have an offensive defence in the west and mount a lightning offensive in the east with the aim of liberating Bangladesh. However, in certain sectors in the western front the Indian Army was to go in full offensive and exploit any fvourable situation to any depth.

Military aims and objectives of the Indian Army were :

(1) to liberate Bangladesh, with the assistance of the Mukti Fouz, in the shortest possible time (maximum within three weeks) ;

(2) to defend India's northern borders against a possible Chinese aggression ;

(3) to defend India's integrity by offensive defence , and

(4) to contain any insurgency activities in Nagaland, Manipur and Mizo Hills.

These were very difficult tasks. The terrain in Bangladesh was not suitable for any operation demanding fast mobility. The whole of Bangladesh is criss-crossed by a network of rivers, canals and creeks most of which posed a formidable obstacle to the mobility of an army.

General Niazi based his plan on the concept of static strong-point defence rather than on a mobile defence. He aimed at preventing the Indian Army or the Mukti Fouz from capturing any town or city and fighting to the last for protecting Dacca.

For months together the Pakistan Army had been preparing those static defences. Thousands of concrete bunkers and pillboxes were constructed. Amazing anti-tank canals were dug on every possible tank approach. There was no dearth of money. Yahya Khan had managed sufficient funds in the name of "refugees rehabilitation and assistance programme," although no refugees returned from India. A few who did return

never went through the so-called reception centres set up by the army. They returned in the same manner as they had left their homes. That entire amount was at the disposal of General Niazi and spent as part of the defence budget. One single anti-tank canal in Belonia had consumed almost 20 lakh rupees.

Initially, Pakistan had only four infantry brigades in Bangladesh under 14th Division. By October Yahya Khan had poured two more divisions (9th and 16th) and another newly raised division was made fully operational. The divisions had their integral supporting units, like artillery regiments, tank regiments and heavy mortar batteries. There were nearly 60 American Chaffee tanks. Its air force had 20 F-86 Sabre jets and the navy had an unknown number of gunboats and coastal vessels procured from China.

As against this, after catering for an offensive defence on the western front and a probable Chinese threat from the north, India could deploy roughly seven infantry divisions supported by field and medium artillery guns and medium and light amphibian tanks. The air force had seven fighter and fighter-bomber squadrons. Besides, there were some helicopters that could be used for troop carrying when needed. The Eastern Fleet, with the aircraft carrier I. N. S. VIKRANT, was likely to face little opposition in the seas and was entrusted with the task of enforcing a total blockade. If and when a war started Niazi must not get any reinforcements or supplies through the only sea route.

Pakistan's infantry divisions were superior to the Indian divisions in firepower by a ratio of 1.5 : 1. And Indian deployment had a superiority in manpower in the eastern front by an ideal ratio of 7 : 4. But Lt General Aurora, commander, Eastern Command, could not expect to get anything more than what was made available to him and he had to do his job, when needed, with only that much.

General Aurora was more than confident of a victory. The entire Bangladesh forces were available to him. There were regular brigades: K Force, S Force and Z Force. Besides, there were about 20,000 Bengali troops in the nine sectors. One lakh guerrillas were fully active-haunting the enemy everywhere. Last and most important of all, 65 million people in Bangladesh would extend full cooperation to the combined forces of India and Bangladesh. Neither Yahya Khan nor Niazi catered for those millions, whose hatred had tilted the balance against Pakistan long before the war began. Indian victory was calculated primarily on the support of the population, a large section of whom had by then learnt the art of handling a weapon or throwing a grenade. They became experts in collecting information about the enemy and could recognise most weapons and equipment by type and country of origin. In my number 2 sub-sector, an eight-year-old boy led almost every patrol party as a scout. During daytime he would alone go to find out enemy dispositions. He would brief us: "Sir, this is Ballavpur village. This is a big pond. Here is a machine-gun post. This is a minefield. I saw a

herd of cattle walking about there and nothing happened. It must be a dummy minefield. Officers live in this school building." He described everything in that manner looking at a field map.

General Aurora based his plan on the dictates of the terrain—keeping his aim fixed on the capture of Dacca at the earliest. To achieve that it was necessary to by-pass enemy's strong defences, secure lines of communication and finally converge on to Dacca. Isolated pockets of resistance would fall as soon as Dacca fell or else could be dealt with later at leisure.

Natural obstacles divide Bangladesh into four major sectors:

(1) North-western sector: It comprises all areas west of the river Jamuna and north of the river Padma. Pakistan's 16th Division with HQ at Natore had prepared strong defences in this sector, especially at Panchagarh, Thakurgaon, Dinajpur, Hilli and Rangpur. Facing 16th Division was India's 33rd Corps of two mountain divisions (less one brigade) with integral divisional artillery, one medium-tank regiment and one light amphibian tank regiment (PT-76).

(2) Western sector: It comprises all areas south and west of the Padma. Pakistan's 9th Infantry Division was deployed in this sector with HQ at Jessore. Opposing that was India's 2nd Corps. This had two mountain divisions with two tank regiments and integral divisional artillery.

(3) Northern sector: It comprises mainly the civil district of Mymensingh where Pakistan had deployed one infantry brigade. An Indian infantry bridgade, 101 Communication Zone, was given the responsibility for this sector.

(4) Eastern sector: This comprises all areas east of the Meghna river. Pakistan had deployed a little less than two infantry divisions here. India had deployed three mountain divisions under 4th Corps.

The natural obstacles made it imperative to make a selection of objectives sectorwise for a decisive victory, always keeping in mind the capture of Dacca, the heart of Bangladesh.

In N-W sector, Bogra was the main communication centre. It was decided to pin down the enemy everywhere in this sector by subsidiary actions, while the main thrust would go through Ghoraghat and Gobindaganj for the capture of Bogra.

In the western sector, Jessore, the main communication centre, was connected with Dacca through Jhenidah-Magura-Faridpur. A deceptive offensive was to be directed towards Jessore, while the actual thrust was to go for Jhenidah and Magura.

In the northern sector, a brigade was to advance along Jamalpur-Tangail axis heading for Dacca.

In the eastern sector, it was imperative that Dacca received nothing from either Chittagong or Comilla. This could be achieved by capturing three major objectives on the line of the river Meghna—Chandpur,

Daudkandi and Ashuganj. Comilla garrison could be by-passed initially.

For the capture of Dacca, the initial objective was to secure the line of the Meghna river between Daudkandi and Bhairab, then advance to Dacca in conjunction with the column moving along Jamalpur-Tangail axis. Elements of advancing column from the western sector were to cross the Padma at Goalandghat and all arrangements were made for such a major river-crossing operation.

Chittagong was given the lowest priority in this planning. Besides my own sector troops of almost a brigade strength, there were two insurgency battalions of the Indian Army and a battalion of Bengal Regiment. This entire force was amalgamated into a strange formation, nicknamed 'Kilo' Force. With the longest supply route and the smallest number of vehicles available, it was a formation of all foot-sloggers. We had a field artillery in support but no armour nor any other support units.

However, in this sector we had inducted two regular companies behind the enemy lines. One company established itself in a safe base in Mirsharai while the other company was in Fatikchari area. The whole of Belonia bulge was cleared and we were making final preparations to capture Feni. It was December 2, 1971. Next day Mrs Gandhi was to address a big public meeting in Calcutta.

Everyone expected that she would announce the recognition of Bangladesh at that meeting.

XXXIII FINAL CAMPAIGN FOR LIBERATION

I drove down a dusty road in Belonia for my forward command post. On both sides, there were ripe paddy fields, ready for harvesting. The sun set, just like on any other day. A full moon gradually came up the horizon. A patrol party was being briefed on its mission for the night. We could hear the clattering of machine-guns not far away. But everything was almost a routine affair, probably on all fronts.

Mrs Gandhi was in Calcutta. That evening she addressed one of the biggest public meetings there and was in no hurry to return to New Delhi.

At General Aurora's Eastern Command HQ it was the end of just another day. And, with the Prime Minister away from her capital, it was a day on which the Eastern Command least expected any major decision or directive.

Yahya Khan was in Islamabad. There were two more days for him to justify that prophecy of "fighting a war within ten days' time".

Although all the forward air bases in India were made operational those were not fully occupied. And Indian Navy's eastern fleet and western fleet were still in their peace locations.

But a 311-foot long submarine, PNS GHAZI, pride of the Pakistan Navy, was silently cruising up the Bay of Bengal. Its destination was the Indian naval base at Visha-

khapatnam, presumably to sink Vikrant, India's only aircraft-carrier.

Friday evening, December 3, 1971. At 5-47 pm (Indian standard time) Pakistan Air Force made a pre-emptive air strike against seven Indian air bases. At 8-30 pm Pakistan launched a major offensive in Chaamb and Poonch sectors in the western front, southwest of the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

India was fully prepared for something of this nature. Mrs Gandhi hurriedly flew back to the capital and at 0-30 on the morning of December 4, asked her nation in a radio broadcast to be prepared for making supreme sacrifices. By that time General Aurora had received the green signal. The Indian Navy had already started filling its 'score sheet'. One of its destroyers, INS Rajput, had detected the Pakistani submarine Ghazi only a few miles off the coast of Vishakhapatnam. Within seconds, the Rajput released a number of depth-charges. As PNS Ghazi, blown to pieces, settled once for all at the sea-bed, the Indian Army and the Mukti Bahini together crossed the international boundary. The eastern fleet moved to its battle location. The Indian Air Force had already gone into action, attacking most of the airbases and radar installations in West Pakistan. At 3 that morning the Indian Air Force made its first air raid on Dacca and Kurmitola air fields. One of the finest and noblest liberation wars of history was at its height.

There was bitter resistance on the first day of the war except on the sea front. The Vikrant was in location

by 10 am. Immediately, six seahawks took off from her decks to strike at vital targets in Chittagong and Cox's Bazar areas.

In the north-western sector 33rd Corps' main thrust went in the direction of Hilli from Balurghat. One brigade moved from Jalpaiguri area towards Dinajpur via Panchagarh and another from Cooch Bihar headed for Rangpur.

In the western sector, 2nd Corps spread its forces in several columns heading for Kushtia, Faripdur, Jessore and Khulna. (In the third week of November the Mukti Bahini had captured considerable ground in Chougacha area.) One column moved for Darshana-Meherpur. Another column moved through the marshes of "Chitter Bill" heading for Jessore-Jhenidah road. The main thrust against Jessore went from the direction of Boyra and areas south of it.

In northern sector 101 Comm Zone moved for Jamalpur from Tura.

In the eastern sector, 4th Corps spread its forces in a number of columns with the immediate aim of capturing the line of Meghna river. Crossing the border near Karimganj, a columm of 8th Division headed for Sylhet while the second column moved for Moulvi Bazar.

In the centre, 57th Indian Division, which was earmarked for Dacca, had cleared much of Akhaura after suffering very heavy losses. The division then moved for Brahmanbaria after leaving a battalion of 2 Bengal

Regiment and a few other troops to contain Akhaura and clear it as soon as possible.

Further south, 23rd Indian Division sent a brigade for Daudkandi, by-passing Comilla defences. Another brigade of this division attacked Chauddagram which they captured without much difficulty and moved for Laksham, a vital railway junction.

By the end of the first day's fighting the allied forces had captured Uthali and Jibannagar in Jessore, Darsana in Kushtia, Charkai in Rangpur and Shamshernagar in Sylhet.

Next day in the north-western sector, Pirganj, Khanpur and Hatibanda were captured. In the western sector Jhingergacha fell to the advancing forces and the central column hit Jessore-Jhenidah road thus cutting a wedge through the defences of Pakistani 9th Division. Kotchandpur in this area was also captured the same day.

In Sylhet area, Munshinagar, 10 miles west of the border, fell. Akhaura was completely cleared of the enemy. The leading column of 57th Division was only a few miles short of Brahmanbaria.

In 23rd Division zone, bitter fighting continued in Comilla and Laksham areas but there was indication that the enemy was not very eager to fight. He was trying to withdraw to safety. Allied forces at Laksham sent a small force to contain the enemy there and the rest of this force moved fast for capturing Chandpur. In my sector enemy had earlier sneaked out of Feni and

our forces immediately entered the town. The capture of Feni severed all overland connections for the enemy between Chittagong and the rest of Bangladesh.

Within these two days, Pakistan Air Force had successfully been neutralised in Bangladesh. In the first day of the war, people witnessed some dogfights. Then as the Pakistani planes started going down in flames one after another people were literally frisking with joy. From the second day the sky belonged to the Indian Air Force. They had severely damaged all the airfields and runways and kept up a relentless pressure so that the enemy did not get an opportunity to repair any runway. Aircraft available to Niazi were unable to take off any more.

In the seafront, Indian naval craft were pounding Khulna, Chalna and Mangla. And Vikrant's aircraft were haunting enemy gunboats, vessels and important military targets everywhere.

In these two days of war, allied forces had not achieved any spectacular success on land; but in most of the places they had entered 10 to 15 miles inside Bangladesh and the campaign was gaining momentum.

At Pentagon, military experts must have analysed the future course of the war and the likely outcome, which was bound to be disastrous for Yahya Khan. Thus on December 5, an emergency meeting of the Security Council was called at the special initiative of the American government. An American ceasefire proposal was, however, vetoed outright by the Soviet Union. The

allied forces were fighting a war to free millions of oppressed people in Bangladesh and, consciously, the Soviet Union could not have supported any attempt to halt that war. The US government, on the other hand, was interested at that time to rescue Yahya Khan and give him a breathing time.

Next day, December 6, Mrs Gandhi announced the decision of her government to recognise Bangladesh as an independent and sovereign state. Immediately, Pakistan broke off diplomatic relations with India. The United States government suspended all economic aid to India. The American 7th Fleet in the South China sea, busy in military operations against North Vietnam, was alerted and ordered to move to the Bay of Bengal. But in the battlefield, the flight of the Pakistan Army had already begun.

By December 7, the campaign took a decisive turn. In north western sector the Mukti Bahini captured Lalmonirhat across the Tista river. 71 Mountain Brigade captured Panchagarh and Pirganj on the 4th and the 5th, but on the 6th their advance was halted at Kantanagar against stiff resistance. The divisional thrust against Hilli was inching its way through. A small force was left behind to deal with Hilli while the division headed straight east for Palashbari wherefrom it would wheel south to capture Bogra.

In the western sector, allied forces cuptured Jessore. Pakistan's 9th Division had been so much panicked at having been cut off from the north that on the evening

of the 6th they retreated towards Khulna in a well organised manner. Jessore defences were so extensive and thorough that no one could imagine to capture this fortress without suffering heavy casualties and in such a short time. On the same day, Meherpur, Chuadanga and Jhenidah were also captured. 2nd Corps' thrust was then directed towards Kushtia, Magura, Faridpur and the last one for Khulna chasing the retreating 9th Division. On this axis to Khulna, the Indian forces cleared two delaying positions at Rupdia and Noapara but ultimately got bogged down at Shiramani after contacting enemy's main defence.

In Mymensingh area, the advancing brigade had contacted Jamalpur defences.

In the eastern sector, Chattak, Fenchuganj and Sunamganj were captured. 57th Division in the centre captured Brahmanbaria and moved towards Ashuganj along the Meghna river bank. In Brahmanbaria, the joy of victory was lost when the bodies of 40 Bengalis were discovered near a canal. Leading Bengalis of that town were picked up by the Pakistan Army in the early hours of December 5 and subsequently killed in a most brutal manner on instructions from the Pakistani brigade commander.

In Comilla area, a containing force was left behind while a brigade moved west for Daudkandi, by-passing the Comilla garrison. On Laksham-Chandpur axis, Hajiganj was captured and a brigade rushed for the river port of Chandpur. At Hajiganj, the allied forces captured an entire enemy battalion.

On that day Bhutan recognised Bangladesh. At the United Nations, the conflict in the subcontinent was taken up by the General Assembly after two vetoes by the Soviet Union in the Security Council. A ceasefire and troop withdrawal proposal—again at American initiative—was passed by a majority vote. Among the big powers, U.S. and China voted in favour while Russia voted against. Britain, France and 8 other countries abstained.

The acceptance of this American proposal in the General Assembly did not come as a surprise. Nor did it come as a shock to deter us from our mission. India, Pakistan or any other nation who were members of the grand organisation might have been obliged to abide by UN resolutions. We were not. We were fighting to free millions of our oppressed people. Our mission was sacred and we were very close to that goal. Even if the 7th Fleet came and joined the war in any manner—helping the Pakistanis—we would still continue fighting. There could be more death and destruction. Those were nothing new to us. For the Pakistanis it was only a question of victory or defeat. For us, either survival as a race or total extinction; either glory or death.

By December 9, hundreds of Pakistanis had either been killed or injured. At many places officers and other ranks were surrendering en masse. Their fate in Bangladesh had been sealed.

In the north western sector, allied forces had captured Palashbari, Ghoraghat, Pirganj, Phulbari and Nawab-

ganj. From Palashbari our forces wheeled south and dashed to capture Bogra.

Enemy troops at Rangpur and Dinajpur were trapped and they had no route to escape.

In the western sector, a vast area west of the Madhumati river had been liberated and our forces were preparing for a river-crossing operation at Kamarkhalighat. Enemy took up defences on the eastern bank of the Madhumati. On Jessore-Khulna axis bitter fighting continued.

In the northen sector, Jamalpur was by-passed and the brigade, after crossing the Brahmaputra river, cut off Jamalpur from Mymensingh and moved south to capture Tangail.

In the eastern sector, Moulvi Bazar was captured. An entire Gurkha battalion was ferried across the Surma river by heilcopters and the battalion landed at Mirpara south of Sylhet. Although Sylhet garrison was holding out, its fate was no better than that of other besieged garrisons.

57th Division and 'S' Force of the Bangladesh Army captured Ashuganj only to find that the famous Bhairab bridge on the Meghna had been seriously damaged by the retreating Pakistani troops. And the Meghna was then a formidable obstacle to the advancing forces.

In the centre, Comilla town was liberated. The enemy had taken up defences on the hills of Mainamati. A bypassing column had captured another important ferry-

site at Daudkandi on the Meghna. The river port of Chandpur was also captured the same day.

We had crossed Chagalnaiya and rushed south to capture Shubapur bridge intact. Another group was sent west to capture Dhumghat railway bridge. In absolute panic the enemy had withdrawn faster than we had expected and were moving towards Chittagong. Before withdrawing they blew up a large portion of both the bridges.

We crossed the Feni river in country boats and established our HQ at Karerhat. Indian brigade commander (of Kilo Force) also established his HQ at the same place. The Feni river was the only obstacle in this area between us and Chittagong and it was thought that we would not be able to cross the river without suffering very heavy casualties. Enemy defences had been very well prepared during the last six months and every individual weapon position would have to be destroyed if the enemy put up any determined resistance.

Earlier, I had sent instructions to the regular company operating near Mirsharai as well as to all the guerrilla groups in Mirsharai and Sitakund areas to start attacking the enemy from his rear. On the night of December 9-10 every guerrilla group started converging on to the highway. And as they moved towards the road they were firing into the sky. In an area 20 miles by 10 miles, so many weapons were being fired from every direction that it would simulate a corps attack and frighten an enemy possessing even the strongest nerves. That very

night the Pakistanis started withdrawing without waiting for withdrawal orders and halted at Sitakund, 20 miles to the rear.

As we reached Karerhat, Indian army engineers started making a pontoon bridge to ferry across all vehicles, heavy equipment, artillery ammunition and supplies. For obvious reasons, 'Kilo' Force was moving with caution. Being part of a regular army, the force commander did not want to move too far ahead till his supply column had been brought forward.

We could not wait. In the evening I took along MCA Mosharraf Hussain and moved in a rickshaw for Mirsharai. That night (December 10-11) we set up civil administration in Mirsharai and I was informed that the Pakistanis had taken up defence near Sitakund.

Meanwhile, General Manekshaw opened another front of war. Fully satisfied with the achievements, he embarked on a timely psychological warfare. His messages were broadcast in a series and were also dropped in the form of leaflets over enemy positions.

Addressed to the officers and jawans of the Pakistan Army in Bangladesh, Manekshaw's messages were absolutely simple and point-blank in approach. "Lay down your arms or die. Allied forces are all around you. Your airforce is finished. They cannot help you. Your ports have been blocked and you cannot get any help from outside. The Mukti Bahini and the people are prepared to take revenge. Your fate is sealed." And then he gave them the assurance: "Lay down your arms

before it is too late. You will be given the treatment befitting a soldier."

Next day, December 10, the Indian and the Bangladesh forces were brought under a unified command. Dacca Radio was silenced by direct air attacks on its transmitters and Vikrant's air fleet kept up a relentless pressure, bombing Chittagong port, airport and other military installations. At Ashuganj, an unthinkable river-crossing operation was under way. Hundreds of people had gathered on the banks of the Meghna to help the allied forces cross that big obstacle. Ten helicopters started ferrying combat troops in a bid to establish a bridgehead on the other side, a few miles south of the bridge. Simultaneously, all sorts of rivercraft, self-propelled or otherwise, were ferrying heavier equipment, ammunition and artillery guns. Amphibian tanks drove through the water and at some stages were just dragged on to the other side. By evening the bridgehead was established and everything was moving across the river without any hindrance.

By December 11, 57th Division was moving fast on Bhairab-Dacca axis. In the north western sector, Hilli was captured after days of bitter fighting. There were very heavy casualties on both sides. The outer defences of Bogra had been broken through and its fall was imminent. In the western sector, Kushtia was captured.

In the northern sector, Jamalpur was captured at 6 am after 3 days of fighting. The same day (December 11) in the evening, a para battalion was dropped near Tangail to

prevent the Mymensingh brigade from reaching Dacca and reinforcing Niazi's Dacca defences. By next evening Tangail was captured and the combined forces were moving south towards Dacca.

In the east, a brigade of 23rd Division captured Laksham and was ordered to move south to join us for Chittagong battle. The task force of US 7th Fleet consisting of a nuclear-powered aircraft-carrier, Enterprise, and six other warships had already crossed the Straits of Malacca and were heading fast for the Bay of Bengal. The American government gave the excuse that the task force was being sent to evacuate American nationals from Bangladesh. That excuse was not acceptable even to the American people, because, on December 11, airstrike was temporarily suspended to facilitate repairs of Dacca airport so that foreign nationals could be evacuated by aircraft of international airlines. American nationals did not like to be evacuated at that time.

But the writing on the wall was clear. When the allied forces successfully established a bridgehead across the Meghna, military experts had predicted that Dacca would fall within 7 to 10 days. Although Niazi was still boasting—"We will fight for every inch of land and fight to the last man"—there was no doubt left in Rao Farman Ali's mind that the game was over. An architect of "Operation Genocide", Farman Ali became fully conscious of his guilt and crimes in Bangladesh. Faced with certain defeat, Farman Ali wanted to escape our wrath and on December 11 sent an appeal requesting the United Nations HQ to arrange for ceasefire and evacu-

ation of Pakistani nationals. Yahya Khan immediately informed the United Nations that Farman Ali's proposal was "UNAUTHORISED".

Yahya was hoping that the American and the Chinese governments would be coming to his rescue and, accordingly, asked Niazi to hang on a little longer. While China was still looking for a pretext, US 7th Fleet entered the Bay of Bengal on December 14.

By then, 57th Division's leading column had captured Narshingdi and was moving fast towards Dacca from the east. A brigade from 23rd Division had crossed Daudkandi and headed for Narayanganj-Dacca from the south. In the northern sector, Mymensingh was captured and survivors of the Pakistani brigade surrendered to the allied forces. Our forces faced some resistance at Joydevpur where their advance was temporarily halted. But that opposition was soon cleared and the forces pushed their way south for Tongi and Dacca.

In Sylhet area, the Pakistani brigade surrendered and the allied forces rushed south.

In the north-west, Bogra was captured and a large number of Pakistanis surrendered in that sector. Whatever small pockets of resistance were left, these had lost any military significance.

In the western sector, the allied forces crossed the Madhumati at night and captured Kamarkhalighat. Scores of country boats and rafts were assembled by the local people and two battalions were ferried across the

river during that night. After capturing Kamarkhali, the allied forces rushed for Faridpur and Goalandghat.

In the east, enemy defences at Sitakund had been broken through after a brief encounter and on December 13 we bumped against his strong defences at Kumira. Ground was favourable for the defenders. It was a narrow strip of land between the sea in the west and the hill range in the east. A bridge on the main road (over a canal with steep banks) was completely destroyed by the enemy. They took up defences astride the road ; his main defences being near the tuberculosis hospital on the hills. Heavy fighting raged for the next 24 hours. We suffered some casualties but by next morning our troops had gained strong foothold on the other bank.

Civil population provided us with valuable information about the enemy and our artillery was engaging every enemy position with pinpoint accuracy. At 3 am on December 14, we captured Kumira. Chittagong was only 12 miles away. Within three hours of our capturing Kumira, our vehicles and artillery guns were moving across the canal. A few thousand men, women and children gathered near the broken bridge. While one group cut the steep banks to make a diversionary road, others fiilled up the canal bed with stones, trees, sand or whatever they could collect. As I watched that memorable sight for some time, an old woman put her hands on my shoulder. "Son," she said, "leave this to us. We will ensure that all your vehicles and equipment are moved across. If needed, we will all lie in the canal and you

can drive your vehicles over us. But do not stop. Please keep moving. Every moment some of our people are being killed." She paused for a moment and with tears in her eyes continued, "You do not know, only days before the Eid festival, a local train was halted in Chittagong and they killed all the Bengali passengers. About 1000 of our people. With swords, knives and daggers. On children they used blades. My own daughter and her children——I do not know——move——move fast." She pushed me and went back to work.

I had already heard of that massacre. The latest message I received from Chittagong city was something more terrible. The Pakistanis and the non-Bengalis had planned to kill the maximum number of people in the city as a last death-bite.

In Dacca, another selective killing took place on that day. Rao Farman Ali had drawn up a list of more than 1500 people—intellectuals,professionals and government officials for extermination. Their crimes—they were Bengalis and cream of the nation. They could render invaluable services to Bangladesh.

Thus on orders from Rao Farman Ali, many of the listed people were picked up by the members of Al-Badar and Al-Shams.

When the bodies were discovered later, most of these were beyond recognition. With hands tied at the back the victims were slaughtered in a gruesome manner. Even their eyes were taken out and skulls broken to take out brains. Men would not slaughter even their animals in that cruel manner.

At that stage it became apparent that there were differences of opinion at the highest level in Niazi's Eastern Command on the futility of any further resistance. Rao Farman Ali's direct approach to the United Nations HQ by-passing his seniors made those differences sharper and more obvious. Foreign journalists, diplomats and United Nations officials at Dacca had been insisting on the Pakistani high command to be more realistic and seek for a ceasefire. The outskirts of Dacca were already under heavy shelling from the Indian artillery and the Mukti Bahini boys were fighting street battles in many areas within the city. People were in a jubilant mood with the approach of the allied forces. Men, women and children all alike would come to the roof-tops and even in the open streets to wave their hands in welcome to the attacking Indian planes while the pale and gloomy Pakistani soldiers would huddle themselves in trenches, frightened beyond imagination. Niazi was still indecisive. So was Dr Malek, the civilian governor of the province.

Dr Malek's decision was, however, quickened by the IAF planes. On December 14, Dr Malek was holding a cabinet meeting in the Governor's House. Mukti Bahini came to know of that meeting. The news was immediately conveyed to the allied forces HQ through various channels. Soon the IAF planes made the Governor's House their direct target. As the MIGs dived one after another, unleashing a number of deadly rockets, Dr Malek, already pale with fear, wasted no time to prepare his resignation letter addressed to Yahya Khan. The entire cabinet resigned there and they all took

shelter in Hotel Intercontinental, declared a free zone earlier.

Throughout this time, General Manekshaw's message asking the Pakistanis to surrender was being repeatedly broadcast. The Indian army chief now made his last appeal to the enemy commanders in Bangladesh. "I wish to repeat," the army chief warned, "that further resistance is senseless. Indian forces are closing in on Dacca and the garrison is well within our artillery range."

The General, however, assured the enemy commanders that if good sense prevailed on them and they surrendered, the allied forces would ensure that Geneva Conventions regarding the treatment of POWs were observed in letter and spirit.

That evening Yahya Khan suddenly changed his mind for unknown reasons and sent instructions to Niazi and Dr Malek to take all necessary steps to stop the fighting. Yahya showed keen interest in preserving the lives of only West Pakistani armed personnel and loyal elements.

Niazi was not oblivious of the developments and was aware that the entire responsibility lay squarely on his and nobody else's shoulders. His dreams were shattered when Yahya became silent about a Chinese or American intervention. Worst of all, his divisions were cut off and badly routed by the allied forces. His 9th and 16th Divisions in the west and north-west sectors could not pull back for the defence of Dacca. The brigade in

Mymensingh was lost and very few from the eastern sector could escape to Dacca. Thousands of his troops, officers and men, had surrendered. Casualty figures were staggering and every day the figures were rising in a sharp curve. Niazi realised that he had lost control over his forces and that eventually they would all surrender without awaiting his orders. Faced with inevitable defeat and probable destruction, Niazi, in a last-bid attempt, sent an offer of ceasefire through the US embassy. Niazi's conditions were that he should be allowed to regroup his forces to certain areas, agreeable to the Indian forces, wherefrc m they could be repatriated to West Pakistan. The next day the Indian Government received this proposal.

Meanwhile, with the reported entry of the 7th Fleet's task force in the Bay of Bengal the situation took a very grave turn. It was assumed that the task force might attempt to establish a beachhead somewhere near Chittagong. Great priority was then laid on the capture of Chittagong at the earliest and 83rd Brigade of 23rd Indian Division was rushed from Laksham area to join us near Kumira. In a bid to cripple the enemy and put Chittagong port out of commission, IAF planes and eastern fleet extensively bombed gun positions and enemy concentration areas, wireless stations, fuel dumps and the port area itself.

The bombing offensive never died down and the fuel dumps were burning for days together. Many ships were damaged and sunk in the river completely blocking the shipping channel. The port was

so severely damaged that it took more than a year to clear the debris and fill up the craters made by 500-pound and 1000-pound bombs.

Information was received from the guerrillas that many Pakistani officers and soldiers were trying to escape to Burma through Cox's Bazar and some were even trying to escape by ships. A few Pakistani ships were painted to look like foreign ships and they even flew foreign flags. The eastern fleet had already been alerted and several Pakistani ships, trying to escape in disguise, were bombarded by the Vikrant. To prevent the enemy from escaping towards Burma an amphibious operation was undertaken and a Gurkha battalion was landed at Cox's Bazar.

By December 15, the allied forces had crossed most of the water obstacles protecting Dacca and were mortaring the city from a few miles. Indian artillery kept pounding military targets in and around the city.

General Manekshaw reciprocated Niazi's proposal by saying that a ceasefire was unacceptable to him unless Niazi surrendered. Yet, as a gesture of goodwill, General Manekshaw ordered a halt to all air actions over Dacca from 5 pm on December 15 to 9 am on 16. In order to facilitate any communication he established a radio link on a certain frequency and kept that on listening watch, awaiting direct reply from Niazi. General Manekshaw assured Niazi, "There will be no reprisal by forces under my command." At the same time, the Indian army chief sounded a note of warning, "However,

should you (Niazi) not comply with what I have stated (an unconditional surrender), you will leave me with no alternative but to resume my offensive with utmost vigour at 9 am on December 16."

The army chief was talking from a position of strength and everyone was so confident of victory that advance parties of certain Indian army units operating in Bangladesh had already been moved away towards the Chinese and the West Pakistan borders.

Meanwhile, in Chittagong area we had cleared a few delaying positions south of Kumira and were in contact with enemy's last and strongest defence complex extending from Bhatiari to Fauzdarhat.

Our aim was to destroy the enemy in this complex where he had the maximum concentration of troops and equipment. If he could withdraw from this complex after successive battles and take up position in the city we would be in deep trouble. Characteristic of fighting in any built up area where every house turns into a solid fortress for the defender, we would need much more troops to inch our way through the city, entailing heavy losses to ourselves as well as to the civilian population. Besides, there could be extensive damage and destruction. Yet none could be very sure of a quick victory in capturing the city.

It was decided to block the enemy somewhere between Faujdarhat and Chittagong. While the blocking force in the enemy's rear would seal all his withdrawal routes, the advancing column in contact with enemy's forward

defences would smash through and destroy the entire force in a typical operation of 'holding by the neck and punching at the face'.

Two battalions of 83rd Brigade—2nd Rajputs and 3rd Dogras—were designated as the blocking force while the third battalion joined us for the attack. The two battalions were to move through the hills in the east, cover a distance of almost 15 miles and then take up defence astride the road, a little south of Fauzdarhat, under cover of darkness.

Twelve hundred civilians were selected to carry all stores of the blocking force which was to be self-sufficient in all respects for at least 4 days. Ration, ammunition, anti-tank guns, mortars, digging stores, cooking stoves and utensils—everything for two battalions had to be carried. Besides, the civilians had to carry ration for themselves and some dry wood for cooking.

Both the battalions marched off well before sunset, adopting an unmarked route through the hills. A few local people moved ahead as guide to this force. Its success was going to decide the course of the final battle in Chittagong.

Some 2000 armed guerrillas of Mirsharai and Sitakund areas had been gathered in the meantime and kept comcentrated at selected places. They would be pressed into battle if needed, especially for street battles in the city. Every guerrilla had a fairly good knowledge of the city area.

That evening we attacked the outer defences of Bhatiari. The attack launched by two companies was repulsed

and we suffered more than 20 casualties. The major offensive was to be launched when the blocking force had taken up position.

The night passed. Came Thursday, December 16. By early dawn, the para battalion from Tangail area had come to within 2 miles of Dacca city. The north-western and western sectors were under full control of the allied forces. So was the case in the eastern sector except for the garrison at Mainamati cantonment, which remained seized. Excitement and tension rose to an unbearable pitch as the deadline set by General Manekshaw was nearing and yet there was no reply from Niazi. Would Niazi surrender or put up a fight, however futile that might be ?

It was past 8 am. Niazi's flash came. He asked for an extension of another six hours and asked for a senior Indian military officer to come down and negotiate the terms of surrender. The request was granted. We did not know of this last development and were engaged in a pitched battle at Bhatiari. The blocking force was making good progress through the hills and we expected them to be on their objective by dusk.

At 10-40 am, Major Generel Jamshed, GOC, Pakistan's 36th Division, surrendered to the allied forces on the outskirts of Dacca.

People within the city became restive. As truck-loads of Pakistani troops started pulling back to Dacca cantonment, in many areas of the city people had started coming out in small groups to go forward and welcome the

allied forces. Even at that final hour of defeat the Pakistanis were full of vengeance and while escaping to the cantonment, they shot many civilians who had come out of their houses.

At 1 pm, Major General Jacob from General Aurora's HQ flew with a draft instrument of surrender. And at 2-50 pm the Indian army commander received the finest message that very few commanders can receive in a life time. Niazi had agreed to surrender with all his forces and signed the draft instrument. By then, Major General Ansari, GOC, Pakistan's 9th Division in the western sector had surrendered. By 3 pm hundreds of Mukti Bahini boys and a brigade of the Indian Army triumphantly entered the city of Dacca. General Aurora, accompanied by air and naval chiefs of staff and the chief of staff, Bangladesh forces, flew to Dacca for the surrender ceremony.

Niazi's orders to surrender had not yet reached all his troops. Nor did we know that the surrender ceremony had taken place at 4-31 pm on the historic race course ground in Dacca.

Least concerned was perhaps one of my most trusted JCOs, Subedar Aziz, and a 15-year old freedom fighter. At Bhatiari both of them were going into an attack with others. They had already driven the enemy across a canal and took up position. The young freedom fighter hailed from a village nearby, which had already been liberated. The day before, I had allowed him 12 hours' leave to go home and meet his parents. "No, sir," proudly.

he had replied, "I shall go home after we have captured Chittagong. It will be very soon. Is that not so, sir?"

While General Aurora and Niazi were signing the document our boys were fighting to capture Bhatiari. It was past 4-30 pm. Enemy artillery opened up and landed in the midst of our attacking forces. Subedar Aziz and the 15-year old boy were injured seriously. Then, as the sun leaned heavily on the western sky, both of them quietly breathed their last. Just at dusk, a Pakistani major came with a white flag up to the broken bridge at Bhatiari. They had received Niazi's order and wanted to surrender.

XXXIV EPILOGUE

The bridge at Bhatiari had been destroyed by the Pakistanis. I left my jeep there and started walking. People from the city had started rushing to receive us. Someone gave me a lift in his car and we drove straight to the Circuit House in the centre of the city.

I had a small packet containing a big-sized flag of Bangladesh. I carried it for that particular occasion. A boy lowered the Pakistani flag and hoisted our national flag on top of the Circuit House. I looked up. It was a clear and bright sunny day. Under a spotless blue sky the flag started fluttering majestically. It was 9-15 am, December 17, 1971.

The most tragic melodrama in the subcontinent had come to an end, may be temporarily. Did it end in

triumph or tragedy or in both? Can mankind set aside those human sufferings only as an inevitable process of history? I leave those questions to the posterity to answer.

Almost nine months of a bitter struggle had come to an end. We became free. A freedom that we earned through unbelievable suffering. A freedom that we had snatched away for ourselves and for posterity. Nay, not us, not the living ones. We lived only to enjoy the fruits of freedom for which others laid down their lives smilingly.

The story of those millions can never be told. We forgot them all too soon. Even in tilling the soil will anyone ever remember that the land was nourished by the blood of those millions who chose to die so that we can live? During those 266 days and nights of fear, uncertainty, horror and panic, death was the only friend that never betrayed our people

I remembered those who fought with me and died in the war. Their memories filled my heart with sorrow so deep that I could stand it no more. And then those millions who lived in a land virtually turned into a prison by the enemy. Those who died. Those who lost their near and dear ones. Their sufferings and sacrifices were so great that I felt too small and humble. Quietly I mumbled

"......And peace, no war
befall thy parting soul;
In prison hath thou spent a pilgrimage."

A wild ecstasy of joy and happiness had gripped the people. They were dancing, singing and embracing each other beaming with smile.

An old man embraced me. His son, a soldier, had died in the war. There was no smile in his face. Nor any tears in his eyes. He was calm and serene, his eyes were closed, and in deep contentment he breathed deeper leaning on my chest.

None could read those mute agonies engraved in a benumbed soul—neither the wailing wind nor the moaning sea.

END